

## the dead don't dream

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# **the dead don't dream**

by [penink](#)

## Summary

There's something wrong with Tommy. Dream will help him figure out what.

Or: Dream starts testing the revive book on Tommy in exile.

Apparently Apollo has cursed me.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

Before reading this fic please do read the warnings. I try to be thorough with tagging them, but if you notice something hasn't been tagged do let me know so I can add it. This fic will be unhappy, but it will not end in nothing but tragedy, so if you do choose to read, know there's always a light at the end of the tunnel.

### AN UPDATED NOTE:

This fic was written before recent allegations came out regarding cc!Dream. I am going to keep this work up as it is a fictional character, but I do not support cc!Dream or his actions and would prefer those that do, do not read my works. ANOTHER UPDATED NOTE: the same now applies to Wilbur Soot.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first time Tommy passes out, his nightmare is familiar. Wilbur, grinning with feverish mania, pacing and rambling cruel words without hesitation or nuance.

Old words ringing in his ears: *let's be the bad guys*.

Then it changed. The nightmares had never changed before. Wilbur stopped pacing this dark void, vengeful monologue exchanged for a split second of confusion.

*"Tommy..?—"*

And then he wakes up, to a white mask and a painted smile leering over him. Far more terrifying than a nightmare.

"Fuck..." Tommy coughs hoarsely. "Ow, my... everything." His whole body aches, he looks down at his hands to see shining burns marring his skin, healed over enough that it won't get infected, but nothing more. His neck throbs painfully as he moves his head.

"Tommy? Can you hear me?" Dream sounds *different*. Almost giddy. "You're back with me?"

"Never fuckin' left, what'd'y'mean?" Tommy grumbles, struggling get off the ground, head spinning.

"Right, right," Dream reaches down and grabs onto his wrist and Tommy thinks for a moment he's giving him a hand up. He's far more puzzled when instead Dream holds on tightly to his wrist, hand digging in harsh enough Tommy can feel his own pulse. Before he can question this, Dream lets go, offering him no help up.

“What happened?” Tommy manages to at least stay sitting up, closing his eyes as waves of nausea collide with dizziness.

“You, uh. You stood too close to the blast. Don’t do that next time,” Dream speaks slowly, carefully. “You knocked yourself out.”

“Great...” Tommy sighs, hand going to his throbbing head, wincing as his neck still twinges painfully. “Of course I did... fuckin’ idiot...”

“Yeah,” Dream agrees. Tommy can’t see Dream’s eyes, but from that slight tilt of his head, it seems like Dream is assessing him. “How do you feel?” Dream’s voice is calm, but there’s something strange there, he’s holding back agitation. Tommy really hopes it isn’t anger, he already feels like he’s got a full body bruise, like he hurt his neck in the fall and the burns still itch sharply as magically induced scabbing is irritated by its host moving. He needs to think of the answer that means the least amount of pain.

“I’m okay, Dream. Sorry I stood too close, that was stupid of me.”

“No,” from the way Dream shifts irritably Tommy already knows he’s failed some test. “I mean how do you *feel*? When you were... knocked out?”

Tommy, through a spark of anxiety, scrambles for the answer Dream seems to be looking for. “I had... I think I had a nightmare,” Tommy’s eyebrows crinkle together as he grasps at hazy memories.

“A nightmare?” Dream grows worse at hiding his excitement. “Did you see Schlatt? What’d he say to you?”

“No— it was... it was an old nightmare. One I’ve had before,” Tommy is too weary to question any of this. The safe thing is to answer Dream as best he can to avoid any more harm.

“An *old* one?” Dream’s excitement wanes into something more suspicious. “You mean you’ve experienced something like this before?”

“Wot, you mean *nightmares*? Yeah I’ve had nightmares before,” Tommy scoffs.

“Don’t patronize me, Tommy,” Dream says coldly. “The only reason you’re alive is because I— because I gave you a health potion after the explosion.”

“Sorry,” Tommy mutters.

“What was your nightmare about?” Dream turns to face the shoreline, arms folded over his chest, full enchanted netherite shining in the sun so Tommy has to squint at him.

“...why do you care?”

Dream turns back to face him, and when he steps closer, Tommy flinches. Dream does not hit him, he crouches down in front of him so they’re eye to eye. Tommy feels dread rise from the pit of his stomach.

“Because we’re *friends*. ”

“You’re...” Tommy’s mouth feels dry. He’s already in pain, so fuck it, this is worth whatever it earns. “You’re not my friend, Dream.”

Dream says nothing for a moment, expression unreadable behind that stupid mask, and Tommy prepares for the worst. Dream laughs, and Tommy is not put at ease.

“Of course we’re *friends*, Tommy. I’m the only one who visits you, I wouldn’t do that if we weren’t friends.”

“Yeah... you do visit me...” Tommy has to grudgingly agree, bitter melancholy growing louder at the thought of home.

*Can you call it home?*

“So what was your nightmare, Tommy?” Dream asks and Tommy knows it’s not a request.

“I saw... I saw Wilbur.”

Dream turns back to face him at this and Tommy immediately knows he did something right. He doesn’t understand why *at all* but if Dream thinks this is good then it’s good enough for him.

“Did he talk to you?”

“*Talk to me..?*” Tommy grew puzzled again. “Not really, I don’t think? It wasn’t a very long dream, and they sort of grow fuzzy after you wake up, right? It was... I think something from Pogtopia?” Tommy scrunches up his face, trying to remember. His head still aches along with the rest of him. “I’ve had that kind of nightmare a lot. Wilbur...” Tommy doesn’t want to tell him. *Let’s be the bad guys*. That’s not *for* Dream. It’s his and it’s Wilbur’s and it’s theirs alone, cruel and bloody words or not. “He was repeating stuff he’d said to me at Pogtopia.”

“Was it like a memory was playing or was it like he was *repeating* himself, Tommy?” Dream pushes on, stepping closer, his patience waning. A bad sign.

“I– I don’t really know,” Tommy stammered. Dream bearing down on him definitely wasn’t making it easier to remember. “He– He *sounded* the same, sort of off his rocker, inne? But– It wasn’t– It wasn’t *in* Pogtopia, it was just in a void, but he looked like he did that day, on the 16th.”

Dream nods slowly, assuaged for now. “Hm. Sorry about the nightmares, Tommy. They’re no fun,” he ruffles Tommy’s hair and Tommy can’t decide if he wants to lean into something gentle for a change or shudder away. The affection is withdrawn before he can decide. Still, it seems like he’s done something right. Tommy wants to ask *why* Dream is so interested in his dreams, but he doesn’t want to push it.

“It’s alright, Dream. You don’t got to say sorry like you *caused* them or something, dreams are just dreams... Dream,” Tommy laughs hoarsely, feeling this irritating sense of relief–

relief, not *pride* or eagerness like somehow Dream's praise is *good*, it's just *necessary*— as Dream exhales a laugh as well.

“Either way, that got the armor out of the way for us, what do you want to do today?” Dream changes on a dime, his cautious analytical demands exchanged for friendship. Tommy knows better than to relax.

Tommy doesn't pass out again for a while. Hungry, dehydrated, exhausted, but he stays conscious. Wilbur stays confined to his usual nightmares, echoing a past long since dead. He doesn't long for those days, only wishes he were living a life different to this dark place he finds himself trapped in.

Dream helps. At least he's not alone.

“I'm so fucking bored I've started fishing— *fishing*, Dream! The boring-est activity there is.” Tommy continues felling the tree in front of him, chattering over his shoulder, Dream follows, standing around while Tommy does his work, struggling with an iron axe. At least Dream offers some protection. Tommy has no armor, so Dream's job will be to kill any creepers that stumble into them. He collects the fallen logs and keeps walking. “You've got to come out here more before I *really* lose my mind,” Tommy looks back to Dream, but he can't see him. “Dream—?”

Before Tommy can shout his name any louder, the ground gives out beneath him. Or that's what it feels like as he steps over open air and falls into a pit. In a split second he sees rocks coming up to meet him, then *pain*, blinding and sharp as he struggles to catch his breath. He's lucky he didn't break his neck.

That becomes harder to take solace in as he looks down at his left leg and sees bone.

“F-Fuck...” Tommy chokes back a sob, trembling hands reaching towards the wound. It doesn't feel real. His arms are scraped from dragging against the side of the pit on the way down, blood dripping down them. No head wounds. That's something. But even with two good legs climbing out of here wouldn't be easy. He squints up at the sunlight above him, too far above. “D-Dream?” He shouts hoarsely.

Tommy is trembling so hard it's a struggle to keep ahold of his axe. He looks further down the pit, which slants away into a cave, extending deeper into darkness. Tommy feels sick with dread. He looks back up.

“Dream!” He tries shouting louder, hating how unsteady he sounds, he sounds like he's crying, he *is* crying, but he doesn't want Dream to know that. There's no reply.

“Oh shit, oh *shit*, ” Tommy stutters out through desperate gasps for air, sobs turning to panic. He watches as blood begins to drip down the rocks, deeper and deeper. If the mobs don't get him, bleeding out will. “ *Dream!* ” He screams again, desperate and frantic. He swore the man had been right behind him, when he'd looked back, though...

He can't have lost him. Dream is his only hope right now.

“D-Dream, please! Please, I’m trapped down here! Someone help me! Please!” He screams himself hoarse, tears marring his face just as blood smears his arms, bits of gravel and rock digging in from impact and he cannot look at his leg, he *cannot* see bone and blood—

“Anyone!” Tommy screams like he’s in agony, which he is. Which he will be more whenever this wave of adrenaline dies. “Okay, Tommy. Okay, you’re g-gonna be okay,” Tommy takes a deep breath and pretends he isn’t still shaking. “Dream isn’t coming, so y-you gotta do this bit on your own.” He looks at his leg and gags. “F-Fuck—”

Tommy takes a few more precious seconds to try and catch his breath. He hears the gentle *tick tick tick* of his blood dripping deeper into the cave. It echoes.

“Y-You can do this, you’ve bandaged wounds before, you can do this,” Tommy steadies his hands enough to tear a strip of fabric from his shirt. “F-Fuck why’d— Why’d it have to be this fucking bad?” He grimaces. Step one, straighten out the leg. Tommy moves so carefully but the moment he touches the wounded leg, shifts it even a fraction of an inch, a blinding bolt of pain shoots through him. Tommy *wishes* he weren’t crying, but if there’s ever a time to break down, now would be it. He lays back against the rocks, almost wishing he would black out.

He’s still bleeding.

Tommy stares up at the blue sky, just out of reach, and for a split second he *thinks* he sees a flash of white over the edge.

“Dream?” He shouts more halfheartedly above. No reply. Not the first time he’d seen shit out here that wasn’t real.

He needs to wrap his leg. If he wants any chance of surviving this he needs to at least stop the bleeding.

*Or don’t. What’s the point? We should let go now. No more fighting or struggling or starving or taking hits. Just nothing.*

Tommy grits his teeth, some bitter defiance still clawing its way to the surface. Tommy gasps, unable to scream as he forces himself to wrap the wound and try and straighten the bone. This won’t work. What he *really* needs is a tourniquet.

Tommy feels like he might be sick, but he fishes a stick out of his inventory and ties the cloth just above the wound. Then he begins to tighten it. Even when it hurts he keeps winding tighter, until the bleeding stops and his leg goes numb. Maybe now he’ll survive long enough to regret that decision. It’s not a long term solution, but he won’t bleed out. Just as Tommy manages to cling to some petty modicum of relief, he hears a distant groan from the darkness.

*No no no no not this not now—*

Tommy doesn’t speak. He doesn’t dare to breathe, instead he fights to stand on his one good leg.

He doesn't have a sword. Or armor. He has a shield and he has his worn iron axe. It won't be enough. He can't even keep upright let alone fight off a mob.

He sees it, rotted flesh limping from the darkness, clawing hands outstretched. Tommy wants to die fighting. He lets out a hoarse shout and brings the axe down on its head, the creature persists, hitting his shield, reaching around it to try and grab at him. Tommy stumbles back, but he doesn't fall, it takes two more good hits for the corpse to stop moving.

Tommy has never been more exhausted, but the thing is dead. He shoves the rotting flesh away with the end of his axe, the scent already mixing with the smell of his own blood.

He just needs to hold on.

Hold on until *what*?

Until Dream comes to rescue him?

Tommy just doesn't want to die out of his own control. He's stared over that edge plenty of times, but this is different. It is one thing to walk into death, another to lay down and die.

He sits there, in and out of consciousness for how long he doesn't know. The pain has not lessened. He's damp with sweat and so thirsty. He'd finished his water already. Nothing to do about it now.

He stopped shouting for Dream hours ago, but sometimes some foolish, desperate part of him thinks he sees a glimpse of a white mask over the edge, but when he shouts, there's nothing.

Tommy must have fallen asleep, but he wakes to the dull thud of an arrow piercing his shield.

He jolts to his feet, forgetting himself for a moment and crying out as weight was put on his dead leg, he barely keeps on his good leg, clinging to the wall before he collapses. It's gotten darker. He has to snap out of it quick. He does not have time to wallow in pain. Another arrow landed in the stone a few inches away from his head. He braces his shield just as the next arrow lands.

Tommy can't hide. He needs to face it. The skeleton won't be coming any closer. Tommy limps forward, one hand clinging to the wall. The leg didn't hurt as much, but that's because he couldn't feel anything in it at all. Another arrow lands. Tommy takes the moment it's reloading to swing his axe at it, bones clatter but do not break. He braces behind the shield, the impact of the next arrow almost toppling him. Another hit from the axe. Two more, exhausting and frantic, and the bones collapse. Tommy is ready to fall back against the rocks, to pass out, and then that familiar sound returns— groaning, low and eerie. Tommy cannot stop. He cannot sit back or stumble away, if he moves any way but to swing his axe forward he will not get back up.

Tommy swings first the moment the zombie is in reach. Then he staggers. And it's on top of him, sending him to the ground with only his shield to keep its clawing hands and rotted teeth at bay. He gags at the scent of rotting meat, struggling to lift his axe around the shield. It keeps going, filthy nails claw into scrapes already on his arm. The weight bearing down on



him, already weak and injured, he can barely breathe. One more hit knocks it to the side. Easier to reach, but he no longer has a shield between them. Tommy pins it with the side of his shield, struggling to sit up and hold it down. He cannot reach it with his axe, it's still brushing against him with rotted hands.

*“ Stop stop stop stop—”* He bashes it into the ground with the edge of his shield until its head rolls back into the dark of the cave. Tommy shudders, fighting not to be sick. Surely he's too dehydrated for tears, but they well up anyway. He pushes himself back into the light, dimmer now as the sun has set, but moonlight is better than nothing. Better than the dark and clawing hands and arrows and *teeth*—

Tommy lets out a strangled scream as another body falls beside him. The zombie does not die on impact, but its legs shatter more easily than Tommy's. It goes down in one hit, the fear worse than the pain. Tommy has collected a small pile of bodies. In such a small space, the smell is overwhelming. If more come he almost hopes the other bodies will slow their approach. His right arm is bleeding more heavily from where the zombie had dug its nails in. His leg is still dead weight.

*It's been too long. You're going to lose the leg. If you survive at all. How are you going to survive with one leg? Expect Dream to take care of you?*

“F-Fuck...” Tommy brushes away tears, rocking slightly against the back wall. He's just so tired.

Tommy struggles to stay conscious. It hurts, *everything* hurts, but if he passes out now, he doesn't think he'll wake up.

He should've payed better attention, he should've heard the rough clatter of bones *before* an arrow landed in his shoulder. Tommy doesn't even scream as the arrow pins his arm to the wall. He rips it out, fighting to breathe. He doesn't know if he'll be able to stand, he puts his bleeding left arm back through the shield and uses it as a crutch. This time the arrow hits the shield. Then he hears groaning. From more than one echoing, undead mouth.

Tommy dares to look over his shield and sees three shadows clawing out of the dark.

*You're gonna go down fighting. It hurts but you're not gonna die easy, not to someone else. You were supposed to choose when you died, so at least die fighting.*

Tommy braces the shield as the zombies reach him, three of them shove him back against the rocks, but he's still standing enough to swing his axe. He targets the one to his right, if he gets it down, that's one less threat. He manages to kill the one, but that's the last bit of fight he has left in him, as the zombie to his left gets around his shield and before Tommy can even try to fight its teeth are sunk into his bloody arm. The third zombie tugs at his shield, bending the already wounded arm until he fears that bone will break too. Tommy swings his axe one more time. It barely grazes the one currently tearing into him. Tommy abandons his axe, his good arm clawing at the stone above him, looking up at the moonlight through blurry eyes. He doesn't know if he wants something to save him anymore.

It doesn't *hurt*. That should scare him more but he only has the consciousness left for relief. His vision feels spotted and he doesn't feel himself collapse against the rocks, he just keeps staring up at distant stars. There's something tugging on his arm but that's such quiet background noise. He doesn't scream, he doesn't fight, Tommy doesn't even see the last arrow hit its mark before he blacks out...

*"I'll make them pay. I will not be fucking abandoned out here. I died a bad guy? I deserved this? We'll fucking see about that, I will destroy—" Wilbur stops his pacing. He turns around, manic look fading to further bafflement. "Tommy?! How did you— How are you here?!"*

*Tommy cannot bring himself to speak. Everything hurts. He feels like he's falling.*

*"Hold on, Tommy! You— You shouldn't be here—" Wilbur reaches out to him, a bloody bandage around his arm. Tommy reaches out to him, but no matter how close he gets it's like Wilbur stays just out of reach.*

*It hurts. Whatever this nightmare is, it feels like he's being torn apart. Or maybe that's some echo from the waking world, where he's surely dying painfully. Wilbur no longer looks vengeful, he looks worried. Even in that bloody coat, that face almost looks like his brother's again.*

*"We'll figure this out, it is— it is good to see you, man," Wilbur's concern is exchanged for relief, frantic and unsettling, but maybe better than rage.*

*"Wil, I don't underst—"*

*"Wake up."*

Tommy jolts awake, gasping for breath, whole and safe in Logstedshire. Dream sits beside his bed, a book loose at his side.

Just as before, Tommy's whole body aches, he feels echoes of brutal scrapes and bruises. His left leg feels heavy and numb, his left arm itches painfully, Tommy struggles to sit up. He can't move, he manages to look down, with an eerie confusion. There are no wounds. Only half healed scabs and an unbroken bone remains. He lays back down, head throbbing. Which would make sense, because just before he blacked out he hit his head...

None of this made sense.

"What... What happened?" His voice is hoarse and his mouth dry.

"You passed out for a while, what do you remember?" Dream asks. He's curious, but unconcerned.

"I was... I fell. A-And I shouted for you and I—"

"No," Dream sounds sharp. Tommy falls silent immediately. "Not before. When you passed out."

“D-Did I..?” Tommy is struggling to focus, it blurs. What happened in that pit, it can’t have been real, he shouldn’t have *survived* that– “W-What the fuck, I shouldn’t– How did I– I should– How am I *here*?”

Dream says nothing for a moment but Tommy can tell he’s irritated. He waits with bated breath, for Dream to scold him or hurt him or give answers.

“I heard you screaming. Finally found you. You were being overrun with mobs. I got you out,” Dream says flatly.

*It was real. It was real and Dream got you out. You’re not dead.*

“F-Fuck–”

“Hey,” Dream sounds more startled. “Stop crying.”

“Sorry, sorry– just, thank you. Fuck, man– *thank you*. It was so dark, it fucking *hurt*– T- Thought I was a goner–” Before any logic can take over, Tommy is clinging to Dream, burying his face in his shoulder, hugging on tight. He can’t stop shaking.

Dream tenses, but he doesn’t immediately shove him away, instead he pats his back, stilted and awkward and unfamiliar, but it’s something Tommy can hold on to. Eventually, Dream grabs onto his arms and pries him off. “Yeah, you’re welcome, Tommy.” He stands. “So, what do you remember? Any more nightmares?”

Tommy looks up at him, taller and stronger and his savior. Tommy wants to ask why. Fear and reverence force him to stay silent.

“I... L-Let me think, I-I’ll try, I’ll–” Tommy scrambles for anything.

*Nothing but dark and hurt and it feels like hours in agony until finally a familiar face–*

“I saw Wilbur again. Another nightmare, but– this one was different, it *hurt*,” Tommy winced.

“The last time– after the explosion,” Dream paces with that book he was carrying open. “Did that hurt?”

“I... I dunno, that time it was not as long? I think. Time doesn’t act right in dreams. Didn’t have enough time to think on if it hurt, this one... felt longer. Felt like hours and hours,” Tommy really wants some water, but he’s scared if he asks Dream for some he’ll say he’s not allowed. Better to answer his questions and get some himself.

“Hm. What kind of hurt?” Dream stops. He’s been writing in that book.

“What’d you... What’d you mean?” Tommy doesn’t follow.

Dream seems irritated for a moment. “There are a lot of kinds of pain, Tommy. Was it like being hit, crushed, drowned, bitten, *what*?”

“O-Oh,” Tommy doesn’t like Dream’s tone. “I-It’s hard to describe, I– I think, like, like being torn apart?”

“Hm,” Dream takes note of that.

Tommy is relieved to be *here* and safe and not in that hellhole anymore, but curiosity is persistent. “Why’re you...” He swallows thickly, rethinking his choice of words. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” Dream’s annoyance feels less sharp now that Tommy has given an adequate answer.

Tommy feels brave enough to ask. “Why’re you writing this down?”

Dream says nothing for a moment and Tommy’s shoulders hunch forward, making himself smaller, waiting for consequence.

Dream laughs lightly and it doesn’t make Tommy feel any more at ease. “Nothing you need to worry about, Tommy. You want my help figuring out what’s happening to you, right?”

Tommy feels anxiety swirl in his gut. “What’d you mean what’s happening to me? Is... something happening?” He’s imploring. Like Dream knows him better than he knows himself. After he’d started seeing shit out in the woods, visions of Tubbo, and just before, Dream’s mask above him when he was trapped. He must be losing it.

“It’s gonna be okay, Tommy,” Dream puts a hand on his shoulder, his hold firm but not painful. “I’ll keep an eye on you.”

Tommy manages a nod, but his dread does not relent.

“Don’t go wandering off so far without me next time. It’s dangerous out there.”

On the list of things wrong with him, waking up underwater is one of the more terrifying. He wakes up already drowning, clawing to the surface in a panic, his lungs burning. He barely makes it to shore before he collapses.

He doesn’t tell Dream.

He doesn’t want Dream to think he’s really off his rocker, he might not trust him to do *anything* alone if he thinks he’s actually insane.

The drowning was terrifying enough. Then there were days where Tommy woke up, struggling to the surface, but he couldn’t make it. No matter what he did, kicking towards air, he couldn’t get to the surface. It almost felt like there were hands pressing down on his shoulders, keeping him under. Tommy tries to scream, choking on salt, his lungs are burning, *begging* for air, tearing him apart from the inside, he can taste blood. His vision grows dark around the edges, then...

Tommy vomits up water on the beach, coughing and sputtering and eyes streaming tears through the sea water.

A hand slams into his back and he ejects more water from his lungs.

“*Tommy!*” Dream’s voice reaches him through the fog in his head. “What the hell were you doing out there?!”

Tommy just shakes his head, fighting for breath.

“Answer me– That’s the third time I’ve dragged you out of the fucking ocean!” Dream grabbed him by the collar of his wet and tattered shirt, shaking him roughly.

Tommy sputters, unable to speak or get any air, one more frantic cough and he manages. “I– I don’t know, I don’t know!” Tommy chokes out, his throat burning from the salt.

Dream holds him there for another moment, Tommy holds onto his hand, like he can somehow stop Dream from taking it a step further and wrapping it around his throat. A moment of silence except for the slow lull of the waves and Tommy whimpering. Dream drops him, shoving him back into the sand.

Tommy continues coughing, his lungs still feel sore and waterlogged, out of the corner of his eye sees Dream pick up a book from the ground and stashed it back in his inventory.

“You’re playing a dangerous game there, Tommy,” Dream sounds cold, less anger but no less terrifying.

“I- I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Dream, I dunno what’s happening to me, I– I don’t understand!” Tommy sputters out hoarsely as Dream paces the beach.

Dream doesn’t reply. He stops, hand reaching to his belt and Tommy covers his face, expecting him to draw a weapon and punish him for his stupidity. Dream retrieves his book.

“What’d you dream about?”

“W-What?”

Dream sounds cold and harsh and isn’t facing him, quill poised in one hand. “You’ve been having nightmares, Tommy. What about this time?”

It’s not a request.

Tommy desperately looks for an answer, he knows if he fucks this up Dream will have a lot worse for him than a book. “I-It was nothing, this time it was just *dark*, no Wil, no nothing. And before, I w-was in the water, and...” Tommy hesitates. The cost of not giving anything to Dream outweighs his fear of Dream thinking he’s lost it. “I swore someone was holding me under.”

“What?” There’s something dangerous there.

Tommy grabs onto fistfuls of wet sand, anything to ground himself outside his waiting horror. “I-I dunno, I’ve been ‘allucinating shit, so, might’ve been... it felt like someone was holding me under.”

“Don’t be stupid, Tommy. When I dragged you out there was nothing there.” Dream’s voice is cool, but he snaps the journal shut with too much sharpness. Tommy cowers when he turns back to him, but Dream just grabs him by the arm and drags him to his feet.

“I...” Tommy knows the conversation is over, or maybe is supposed to be, but he has to ask. “I dunno w-what’s happening to me, Dream. Every time shit gets bad I-I black out and I have these dreams and I’m seeing shit. I d-don’t understand—”

Dream turns to face him and puts a hand on either shoulder. Tommy bites back a whimper and tries not to flinch. “Hey, you don’t *need* to understand it. Okay? I’ve saved you. Every time I’ve saved you. You’re fine, Tommy. You have me.” Tommy manages a nod. Dream speaks more softly now. “It’s okay, Tommy. Don’t you worry. I’m gonna figure it out.”

It almost scares Tommy more that he feels relief.

## Chapter End Notes

I love some dramatic irony. Tommy has no idea what's coming :(

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

"Tomorrow when the farm boys find this freak of nature, they will wrap his body in newspaper and carry him to the museum.

But tonight he is alive and in the north field with his mother. It is a perfect summer evening: the moon rising over the orchard, the wind in the grass. And as he stares into the sky, there are twice as many stars as usual."

—The Two-Headed Calf, Laura Gilpin

### Chapter Notes

This one features Tommy's suicide attempt! It is canon aligned, but this time Tommy does go through with it, the consequences are not permanent ofc as there's more to come, but it happens. Also including animal death as Mushroom Henry dies :( and the usual depictions of violence and abuse, so please read with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy is tired of being alone. He's tired of Dream being the one to drag him out of the gutter. An explosion, a fall, a mob, Tommy *knows* he's grown careless, that happens when you no longer care if you live or die, but it hangs over his head, Dream always being the one to wake him from some distorted vision of Wilbur. Every time Dream heals him and reminds him of just how much he owes him.

Ghostbur visits again. He'd been drifting in and out of camp throughout the weeks, and now he returns, wandering out of the woods, something that would normally be a bittersweet sort of relief after so long in his absence, but instead there's only more unnerving confusion.

"Hey Tommy! You look different, but I can't seem to put my finger on it," the ghost drifts around him. Tommy tries to bottle his irritation. This is the only other friendly face he has out here. Considering Dream's lack of face and friendliness, maybe the only friendly face at all.

“Hello to you too, Ghostbur,” he says dully. “It’s rude to talk about people like that, you know.” He holds back a less kind critique. *What gave it away? Is it the tattered fucking clothes? It’s the fact that I’ve lost a fuckton of weight? Is it the fact that no matter what I fucking do I always have scrapes and bruises?*

“Is it?” Ghostbur cuts off his bitter train of thought and tilts his head curiously at him, drifting through the air like the salty wind is tugging at him. “But I don’t know what it is! You’re like... I know what it is!” He claps as the realization comes to him. “It’s proximity!”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You know, you’re *closer* now!”

“You say that like I know what it fucking means!” Tommy’s exhausted annoyance bleeds through. He’s too exhausted for the ghost’s vague antics.

Ghostbur takes the very blunt hint. “Anyway, well. I’m glad you’re here today. I can see you’ve been, ah, out and about,” he says cheerily, like he’s mentioning a holiday.

“That’s not funny, Ghostbur. You well fucking know I can’t go anywhere else,” Tommy trudges on gloomily, a collection of fish at his side. Dream won’t let him have livestock or a farm. He can’t remember the last time he wasn’t hungry. Ever since he broke his leg, despite whatever god tier health pot Dream had been giving him, he couldn’t shake this slight limp, his leg still felt a bit numb. At least it didn’t hurt as bad.

“Not like that, Tommy! I’m sorry,” Ghostbur is apologetic immediately. “I meant leaving in the more me-sense, you know?”

Eerie confusion. This feels wrong. A lot of things about Ghostbur feel wrong, but this is a different sort of wrong. “...Wot?”

“You know—”

“Hey, Tommy.”

Tommy jumps out of his skin, dropping his line of fish. “Jesus fucking christ, Dream— Scared me half to death.”

“Hi, Ghostbur,” Dream says it with something else behind his words, something between wariness and curiosity.

“Hello, Dream!” Ghostbur waves enthusiastically.

“What were you two talking about?”

“How I can’t fuckin’ leave here,” Tommy mutters before Ghostbur can reply.

Dream ruffles his hair. “And whose fault is that?” He says teasingly.



Tommy manages a smile, but it's more like a grimace. He wishes Dream's presence didn't dull the ache of loneliness in his chest. He doesn't want to lean into Dream's touch when he ruffled his hair or patted him on the shoulder when he was just as likely to slap him across the face. Desperate times. He would take what he could get.

Ghostbur looks at him differently now. Maybe Tommy is just paranoid, but there's something there behind those vacant, pale eyes. When he thinks Tommy can't see him, he's watching him. Like he's waiting for Tommy to disappear.

Sometimes he forgets how haunting a ghost can be.

Ghostbur disappears himself within a matter of hours, not even stopping to say goodbye. He was just drifting around one minute and then gone the next. Dream shrugs, unsure of where he'd gone either.

There are worse ghosts to face.

It keeps happening. Dream *told* Tommy not to wander off without him, but he'd just wanted to get out. Seeing the same dreary trees and the same chunk of coastline is driving him mad. So Tommy wanders. He hasn't eaten, he's already weak, all it takes is a fall. Tommy's carelessness is growing more and more deliberate. Another nightmare, every time it feels like a little eternity alone in the dark until finally he drifts closer to something. This other version of his dead brother has left speeches and old paranoia behind.

*"Tommy! There you are— Took long enough— I think I understand now, I could see it! I could see it, Tommy, you have to run, you have to get out, he's—"*

"Wake up."

Tommy gasps awake. This time it wasn't an explosion or a mob. He can't pin down what happened. He'd felt weak with hunger, hadn't had much water either, but he'd gotten used to that constant sort of dizziness. Then he had taken a little fall, and passed out. Wasn't a particularly stressful situation. He normally didn't pass out unless it was something scary.

"That was a strange one, Tommy," Dream shakes his head scoldingly. "I almost didn't find you, and then what would you have done?"

"I dunno what happened... I don't remember," Tommy presses the palms of his hands into his eyes, trying to stop the room— or rather tent— from spinning.

"The usual. You passed out, I saved your ass," Dream has his book in hand and watches on expectantly.

"Oh— uh, felt longer," Tommy knew what was expected now. His neck twinges painfully, his hand rubbing it, trying to crack it to get rid of the tension. "Still hurt, but it's like, when you're in pain all the time sort of fades, don't it? Took forever for me to see Wil again. He was all... all frantic," Tommy's brows furrowed as he stared past Dream out at the sea, waves steady and calming after so much disorientation.

*I think I understand now. You have to run, you have to get out. He's—*

Tommy feels like he's putting his hand in a dragon's mouth, he feels vulnerable and weak, like Dream can read his thoughts, but Tommy holds strong. He doesn't tell him. "You know, talking about blowing up L'Manberg. The usual." The lie felt thick on his tongue, it felt like an accusation binding him, a threat. There's bravery in a lie.

Dream doesn't say anything for a moment, the black eyes of his mask stare into him. *He knows he knows he knows he knows he knows—*

"Hm. How long do you think it was?"

Stark relief. Tommy hopes it doesn't show on his face. The next words are easier by far. "No idea. Felt like a *long* time. Felt like hours."

"I found you maybe a half hour ago."

Tommy shrugs. "Y'know, dreams, man. Time gets all fucked up."

"Right," Dream continues his notes. "Are you hurt?"

"My neck hurts a bit, but I'm fine, really." Tommy thinks he's avoided some wrath.

Tommy lied to Dream. He *lied to Dream's face*. Tommy shouldn't have gotten that kind of adrenaline rush from something so simple. And he didn't get caught. Dream just kept talking. It isn't quite freedom, but it's something.

Tommy took that risk. So he'll take another.

Just digging out the room underneath Ghostbur's little house is frightening enough. Still, he feels stronger. He'd lost all reason to get supplies, to struggle, to work. He'd rather lay down and die, but now there's *something*. Something to blame outside of himself. So he throws himself into mining, keeping his passion hidden to only when Dream isn't there, he stashes away iron and gold, precious pictures and food stores. He can be hungry and miserable and without armor while Dream is there. *Tommy* knows he's better. He has *something*. Still half starved and always a mess of scrapes and bruises, but whatever that dream was, Wilbur had warned him. It feels like someone is on his side.

"Tommy? You still with me?" Dream snaps his fingers in front of his face.

"Y-Yeah, sorry, just tired," Tommy shakes himself. His mind wanders, staying back in that secret room of foodstores and tools. He's hungrier now, since what meager food he can gather he half stashes away, but he was dizzy and weak before, the difference doesn't feel important.

"You haven't been, uh. *Going for swims* much," Dream says pointedly like it's a question.

"Wot? Oh, yeah, I guess I haven't," Tommy frowns. "That's a good thing, though, innit?" Tommy had been so enveloped in his recent project he hadn't even noticed. He hadn't woken

up drowning in a while. His nightmares had stayed ordinary, feeble echoes of a Wilbur from the past, *let's be the bad guys*, no new warnings or changes.

"Hm. Yeah. You're not passing out as much either."

"Yeah, dunno how," Tommy laughs harshly. "Still fuckin' starving, you'd think I'd be fainting more, eh?" He was careful not to blame Dream for his current food scarcity, even though the lack of farm and livestock were the major contributors. Sometimes Dream would give him potatoes, even steak. That kindness made up for it, surely. Tommy had mostly been living off of mushroom soup. He was growing to hate the taste, but Mushroom Henry's company made up for it. Tommy wasn't taking care of himself, that was just a fact, but he was taking care of *something*, and somehow that seemed to make a difference.

Tommy still kept the more precious things in his Enderchest, but a few pictures had gotten tucked away in those chests as well. His secrets, his safety, his responsibility. Tommy had something to care about. That was an unfamiliar feeling. It had been too long, months now, since he'd cared about anything.

"Hm," Dream almost sounded irritated, or disappointed. Tommy was too distracted to take worry in that. Dream heads into Logstedshire proper. Tommy follows. "Has Ghostbur been back?"

"Since before? No, no he hasn't," Tommy watches him carefully, unsure of what Dream wants from him.

"Hm," Dream seems satisfied with this.

"Wish he would," Tommy scuffs his feet in the dirt.

"Why would you need him? I'm here. I still visit every day."

"Yeah, and I'm grateful," Tommy says quickly. A different Wilbur, no less dead but far more *real* and intangible at the same time, it makes the grief a little more awake on days like these. "Just... miss him a bit, is all."

Dream scoffs. "Why? It's not like he's really your brother."

Tommy would've preferred if Dream had hit him.

He remains there, frozen in the entryway to Logstedshire, eyes closed like he's bracing himself against a wound already opened.

He hears digging. He thinks through what he has on him. Not much. Not enough that he'll be able to keep anything. He has an axe. He doesn't have any armor. It would've been nice to have armor. If he gives up armor sometimes Dream lets him keep his tools. He's so hungry. If Dream has him give up his food this day will be fucking miserable, but once he leaves he can get soup from Mushroom Henry. Tommy thinks if he sees another mushroom he might puke, but that'll change when he gets even hungrier later. Something feels off.

Dream hasn't spoken yet.

No, *put your armor in the hole*. No impatient shove to get him moving. There's nothing.

Dread.

Tommy opens his eyes and reenters Logstedshire. He doesn't see Dream immediately.

"...Dream?"

Then he sees the hole.

Not like the others. This one is flush with the building and through it he can see torchlight.

"Dream?" Tommy's voice feels frail. He feels petrified, but he walks forward anyway, looking down to see his tormentor, his only friend, his only anything, placing tnt in the room with all of his precious belongings.

"I-I'm sorry," it's the only words that come to mind. Dream doesn't stop. "Please— Please, no—"

Tommy cowers as the explosion rings in his ears, covering his head as bits of stone scatter. His arm is bleeding from stone flying away and he knows that familiar feeling of a burn forming from where he had tried to protect himself from the blast. He's shaking now, he looks back up and sees charred metal and wood.

Behind Dream, facing away from him, he sees a half broken chest. There are pictures inside of it. Tommy walks quickly past Dream, shoving them into his pockets, stumbling over hot and broken stones.

"Empty your inventory," Dream turns back to face him, voice deadly and cold.

"O-Okay, okay, it's not much—" Tommy throws his tools on the ground, bits of stone and wood, even his food, anything to make Dream relent.

"All of it," he repeats sharply.

Tommy feels its weight like a stone. A single charred picture of Tubbo.

"P-Please, that's all of it, I-I gave you the food, I gave you all of it," he's pleading. Tommy can feel his heart beating in his throat.

Dream doesn't reply, just sets to burning what he let go.

"D-Dream, I'm sorry—"

"Shut up."

"I didn't— This wasn't—"

"You *lied* to me, Tommy," Dream towers over him. "You kept things from me."

"I-It was just stuff—"

“What, so you could *plan*? So you could gear up to fight me?” Dream isn’t quite fury, but instead something cold, an icy anger burns worse.

“No, no! It wasn’t like that at all!”

“You know what, I think you’re better off alone, Tommy.” It’s so hard to read him, Dream is just empty in words and that smile staring back at him accusingly.

“I– I don’t understand–”

“You don’t deserve to have a friend visit you. No more visitors, no more nothing.”

“Wait, *wait*, ” Tommy must truly be desperate as he steps forward and grabs onto Dream’s arm. “Please, you can’t leave me out here, you *can’t*–”

“I *can*, actually,” Dream yanks away. “Not forever. I’ve got to come back and make sure you haven’t fucked up some other way. I’ll take the food with me. And you can let that remind you of what you did.”

“O-Okay, so you’ll come back–”

Dream doesn’t reply. Tommy’s anxiety only grows.

Tommy might have stayed docile, bottled his rage as a matter of self preservation, persisted in his desperate apologies, clinging to Dream like a lifeline, flinching away from the man’s every move. That is, until Dream climbs out of the rubble of the secret room and Tommy follows. He sees red. The fur of a mooshroom, and the blood, a deeper red pearly on the soft hairs on his back and spreading further through the grass. Tommy stands frozen, feeling bile rise in his throat. It’s not just the loss of his only stable food source, it’s the loss of his only other friend out here. He can only stare fixated, at another innocent sent to the slaughter by Dream’s blade. Dream stands over the dead animal, unfeeling and procedural. It’s all of it piling together, losing little valuables and his pictures– his fucking *pictures*– to an explosion, losing the only living thing he felt safe with anymore, and those words feel too close, *not like he’s really your brother*.

Tommy snaps. All of it building up to the point that anger overtakes fear. Something about that glimpse of Wilbur telling him to fight, that’s all he needed.

“Fuck you! You don’t have the fucking right– just *get away from me!*” Tommy screams the words out, like somehow that can harm Dream, he shoves him as hard as he can, just enough that Dream actually staggers back, startled by Tommy’s sudden efforts. “Get the fuck out of my camp! T-This is *my* exile! Why are you even here?!” Tommy pants, hands balled into fists, adrenaline flooding his veins. This won’t end well. He doesn’t care anymore. He just wants it to end.

Dream seems to scoff at him at first, no shouting or fury, just an amused sort of huff. Like he didn’t think Tommy had it in him. Dream is not a monster, or not only a monster, he *is* a short burning fuse. Tommy knows this is the calm before a storm. He won’t give up

regardless. When Dream steps forward, Tommy refuses to step back. He won't give him the satisfaction.

Dream backhands him hard enough to send him to the ground, clutching his cheek but no less defiant, glaring up at him. So Dream doesn't stop, and his fury finally burns.

"You owe everything to me!"

A kick, knocking the wind out of him and sending him flat into the dirt.

"I am the only one who puts up with you."

Tommy's panic returns, he doesn't like being on the ground, the sky spins above him as he falls back, Dream might actually kill him this time and maybe Tommy *is* scared of it—

"I am the only one who wants you alive!" Another kick nails Tommy in the jaw, the pain ringing through the back of his head.

He doesn't want to die like this. He doesn't want to die terrified. He doesn't want to beg. He tries to stand, to get away from the boot still beating against his chest, Dream grabs onto the scruff of his shirt and drags him up, slamming him into the outer wall of Logstedshire, knocking what little breath he has out of him, his head throbs painfully as it hits the log.

"With good reason. All I ask for is *obedience*. And you can't even do that!" Tommy is kicking at the ground, lifted off his feet and scrabbling desperately at Dream's hand around his throat, stopping when Dream again lands a sharp blow against the side of his head, Tommy stopping his resistance as his ears ring, dazed. "Pay *attention*, Tommy. You owe me your life a hundred times over. You owe me everything you are. Your life is mine. Got it? *You* are mine."

Tommy can't breathe, he can't think, even as Dream's words flood his veins with an icy chill, he again claws at Dream's hand around his throat, fighting for air. Dream doesn't stop, not seeming to care if his favorite toy is strangled in the process— worse, through the rage, through the blood, and the brutal disappointment manifesting in every blow, Dream seems like he's having *fun*.

Tommy feels like his lungs are on fire, like his neck is being crushed and broken, his vision starts to blur, he's trying to pry Dream's hand away, enough for any air, he tries to claw at Dream's face, anything to take a breath. Tommy can't even plead for mercy as it goes to black...

It's night by the time he wakes. He's lucky a mob hadn't found him first. Tommy's first thought is far from rational or important.

*No dreams. You didn't see Wilbur that time.*

His whole body feels battered and bruised and as he looks around the lit up fields of his exile, he's utterly alone

*He strangled you until you passed out. He could've killed you. If he was willing to risk it once what's stopping him from doing it again?*

He wasn't scared to die. He just wanted to die on his own terms.

There's a weak sort of understanding here, Tommy's fear fades quickly to something eerily like calm. It's a calm at the surface of a riptide, but he doesn't stop.

Tommy knows he won't be able to speak, to say goodbye to the world properly, he was stupid enough to try for a moment and the pain was enough to discourage a second attempt.

Tommy still has his usual stores, other than the food as promised. Dream seemingly left just after he blacked out.

Tommy collects stacks of wood. He needs to make sure it's high enough. It's procedural. His hands aren't shaking anymore, they're steady. His chest hurts, every breath is wheezing and painful. Dream definitely broke a rib. He doesn't stop, he stumbles through the well lit areas along the beach. He refuses to let a mob to do it. It's strange how this night feels quieter than others. He hadn't realized he talked to himself that much, but all that time alone and Tommy never adjusted to silence. Maybe if he could speak he might've talked himself out of it.

It feels almost like any other project. He could be making a cobblestone tower, or designing a rail system, or repairing the prime path. Instead he just builds up, one step at a time. Tommy climbs until he can't hear the waves anymore. He's on this precipice. He is not hesitating, but it isn't time yet. It's colder up here and the breeze tugs at him, telling him to hurry up. Tommy looks up at the sky, stars and a few clouds drifting. He thinks of Clara the Astronaut.

*She'd be disappointed in you. You wanted someone to care about you and you made someone just to hurt her.*

*She doesn't get the right to be because she didn't save you either.*

*She's not real.*

*It's not her, is it? You didn't save you either.*

Tommy is powerless and he has no reason to think otherwise, he could run, but he'd already proven time and time again he literally *cannot* survive on his own. It's like he'd feared. If he'd lost his leg he would've been entirely dependent on Dream and he couldn't live like that. He didn't lose it but the end result is just the same. How could he take anything back from a person he *needs*? He doesn't have L'Manberg, he doesn't have Wilbur– or not enough of him at least– nor Tubbo, who had abandoned him with utter clarity, his discs were scattered. If Tommy is so broken down now that any rough day leaves him blacked out on the ground until Dream pieces him back together, he could never survive the sheer effort of restoring what once was.

Dream wasn't wrong. That stings maybe the worst of it. *You owe me your life a hundred times over. You owe me everything you are. Your life is mine. Got it? You are mine.*

He would take his life back from Dream the only way he could. There's a victory in that, surely. If he cannot keep living without Dream, then he won't keep living.

Tommy wouldn't hesitate, or at least he didn't think he would. He doesn't even know if it's hesitation, but he prolongs his plans as he feels the half burnt picture of Tubbo in his pocket. His hands have been steady all evening, his arm a mess of purple, some bruises more faded than others, but they stand out bluer in the moonlight. His hands are shaking now. He holds the photo in both hands, swaying dangerously close to the edge. Tommy feels a pang of guilt, because looking down at his best friend's smiling face, from a time maybe deader than him, Tommy doesn't have any second thoughts.

There are no goodbyes to be said, even if he could say them.

For the first time in too many months Tommy finally feels back in control, like he decided what happened to him rather than simply bearing what was done to him. He's deciding something for himself, and that's almost enough of himself to keep on living.

This time it's not enough.

In the morning, Dream will find him crumpled on the ground, bones broken, dead long enough for rigor mortis to have set in. His fingers are stiff and rigid, unable to let go of the picture of his best friend even in death. Dream will carry his body to New L'Manberg, but tonight, in this moment, he is still alive. There are still stars, and soon he won't be scared anymore.

## Chapter End Notes

I don't normally update this often, but this one is my current passion project! I'll try and update consistently, but probably not every day. Comments are what get me writing, so any feedback is appreciated <3



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

Tommy stares into the endless void, calm but far from content. “I never really thought about what happens after you die.”

Wilbur has just been staring at him, trying to piece together this boy with the image he has of a young soldier. “Not even for me?”

A nice long chat between brothers. Finally.

## Chapter Notes

not really any specific warnings for this one, grief, death, discussion of suicide. The usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Dream walks into New L’Manberg with Tommy in his arms, Tubbo’s first instinct is to call Ponk. They clearly need a doctor. Tommy would never let Dream this close to him otherwise.

“Oh my god– oh *fuck*, ” Quackity speaks up first. “Tommy.” He says it like an uneasy question, like a statement of fact, like an expression of shock, nothing quite like a name.

It hasn’t hit Tubbo yet. Not really. Ranboo puts a gentle, unsure hand on his shoulder. Fundy isn’t here today. Maybe that’s better.

Dream comes up to the platform they’re on. He’s holding Tommy so carefully, and is careful still as he puts him on the ground in front of them.

“I am...” Dream’s voice trembles. “I am so sorry, Tubbo. He– I didn’t– I found him this morning.”

“What the hell happened?” Quackity is the first to speak. He’s holding onto Tubbo’s other arm. Tubbo doesn’t know why he and Ranboo are holding onto him like he’s about to fall over. Tubbo isn’t moving at all, in fact. He’s only thinking. Tommy needed a doctor, a health potion, *something*.

“He, uh. He jumped,” Dream says it like an apology.

“You mean on *purpose*?” Ranboo asks, stunned enough to speak up.

Dream nods, still staring down at Tommy. “He built a tower. Some time last night, I think. I dunno what *happened* I feel like I just saw him—”

It’s rage which hits Tubbo first. Not grief, because Tommy cannot be dead.

“You’re lying,” Tubbo’s voice is cold and trembling.

“What?” Dream has a note of defensiveness in his tone, the hostility radiating off of Tubbo is more than apparent.

Tubbo stares down at a bruised and broken body.

The last time he saw him, Tommy was hurt and betrayed, looking back at him one last time in the rain with something less like anger and more like longing. If he holds that image of him alongside the sickly, unmoving form at his feet...

That cannot be his best friend. His best friend would never do something like this.

Just like Tubbo would never exile him.

Tubbo feels like he’s detached from his own body as he kneels down beside him. Tommy’s eyes are closed. There are bruises along his jaw, around his neck, his left leg is bent at a harsh angle and his torso seems bent and crumpled. Tubbo ignores all of this and brushes a hand against Tommy’s face. It’s cold to the touch.

Dream continues speaking to fill the silence. “I knew he was kind of sad about not being *here*, but he... he really seemed okay. I was out there with him, I tried to help him, but maybe I just thought he was stronger than he actually was.”

*Maybe I just thought he was stronger than he actually was.*

Tubbo can hear the blood pounding in his ears, his chest aches, Tommy is so cold. Tubbo doesn’t think he can breathe, until can’t stand it anymore. He’s on Dream in an instant, clawing at him, desperately trying to tear into him like somehow he can dig Tommy out of his old enemy’s chest. “You’re lying! *You’re fucking lying! You fucking killed him!*” He’s screaming like he’s in agony. He is.

Dream stumbles back, trying to protect his face. He never hits back, he doesn’t try to stop him, even as Tubbo makes him bleed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so fucking sorry—” he stammers out apologies over and over again. Like he’s pretending to be Tommy, the Tommy he’d pruned and plucked in exile. The Tommy which remained unknown to these people, only a corpse left behind.

Tubbo wants to hurt him. He wants this man to bleed and burn beg him to stop and then he wants to hurt him worse. Even as Dream backs away, innocent and passive, Tubbo doesn’t stop, he’s going to rip him apart with his bare hands, tear open his ribs until he finds his best friend because he has to be lying—

Firm hands are pulling him back.

“Please, Tubbo—” Ranboo, soft and unsure.

Quackity is more insistent, but he’s so gentle as he tugs Tubbo away, holding on as Tubbo still struggles to tear into Dream, already having scratched his arms pretty badly. “You have to stop, man. This isn’t good for anybody, come on, you can’t—”

“I am so sorry— Fuck, Tubbo, I— I know it’s my fault, I promised you I was keeping him safe, and every time I went out there he said he was fine— he said he was *fine*,” Dream’s voice trembles, a hand going under his mask to brush away tears.

“Y-You have to be lying,” Tubbo crumbles. “Y-You can’t—” he chokes, sobs rising up unbidden. He doesn’t want to break. “Tommy— *please!*” He doesn’t know who he’s pleading with. “Y-You can’t— *Tommy!*” He screams his name like he’s trying to call him home. There is no reply.

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*“Tommy? You still with me, man?”*

“Yeah. Er, yeah I think I am.”

It still hurts, this drifting in the dark. After so much time it feels easier. It felt like it took hours to find Wil again, a single figure in the dark. Tommy still feels like he’s more falling than floating. It hurts.

“You normally aren’t here this long.”

“Yeah, well. You weren’t exactly consistent in my life either,” Tommy doesn’t know why this dry, sarcastic comment is what comes to mind. He can’t remember what came before now. He built a tower, then...

Nothing.

Wilbur just laughs. “I mean, it’s good to see you, man. You know what this is, right?”

“...A fucking weird dream?”

Wilbur gives him a look, raising an eyebrow. He doesn’t look any more sickly than he did in life. He is not that washed out grey of Ghostbur, just the paleness of someone who spent too much time pacing and raving underground in a ravine. “Sorry to break the news, but you’re dead, mate.”

“Oh,” Tommy isn’t exactly surprised. “I-Is this it? Is this everything that comes after?” He wishes he didn’t sound scared. He’d needed to be brave for Wilbur for so long, up until the day he died. It’s hard to break the habit and let himself be weak around his big brother.

Wilbur looks at him with profound pity. “Dunno, Tommy. It’s all I’ve seen at least. And it’s been... a long time. A really long time.”

Tommy's voice trembles but he can't help it. If there's ever a time to let go into his emotions, being dead would be it. "W-Why does it hurt? When does it stop hurting?"

Wilbur frowns, something like amused curiosity is sharply exchanged for concern. "What?"

"When does it stop *hurting*? When does it fuckin— when does it stable out?" Tommy doesn't want to cry. He'd think dying would be enough for him to stop feeling helpless in suffering.

"What're you talking about, Tommy?" Wilbur leans forward and reaches out a hand to him, to put it on his shoulder. He's just out of reach. Somehow, he can't get any closer.

"It feels like you're falling to pieces, right? It feels like you're just falling in general? Right?!" Tommy doesn't know why he's pleading. There's nothing to hope for in a place like this.

"N-No, Tommy, it doesn't, you're— I don't understand why it hurts," Wilbur stands up, even though Tommy cannot see what he's standing on. He looks around Tommy like he can see something in the blackness. "I'm gonna help you, man. Dunno how, but... you said it feels like *falling*?"

"I *am* falling. A-And it's pulling me apart," Tommy laughs hoarsely. It's not agony so blinding he can't think, but he cannot spend the rest of eternity feeling like this. He won't be able to bear it, feeling like his atoms are being pulled from each other one by one, over and over, only to fall back together and begin again. He's barely aware of his body, if he has a body, but he'd rather think about his skin tearing from his body than some horrible mangling of his soul. He looks blurry. Tommy looks down and he's there, he has a body, but it's like he's fraying at the edges.

"You're not falling, okay, Tommy? You're not." It's so different to Dream. Wilbur is not demanding he be okay or believe him, he's trying to reassure him. He's trying to make it okay.

"I w-wanted it to be over, Wil," Tommy is crying now. He's crying worse when he realizes they are tears of relief. "I finally got away from it. I got away from him— I d-didn't want to but I *had* to, Wil. I had to."

Tommy feels it, this deep rooted shame. He died the same way Wilbur did, despite knowing how much it hurt the people he left behind.

*You had no one left to leave behind.*

"What?" Wilbur is distracted from his task of trying to determine why Tommy is so unattached from his train station. Tommy's words make him freeze, cold dread sinking in. "How'd you... how'd you die, Tommy?" He waits, but Tommy offers no reply, so he paces, a pale imitation of the madness of Pogtopia. "Wait— How did— When you were here before, only for bits and pieces, that was him killing you. And you'd... you'd get pulled back. That pathetic fucking ghost could *see* it on you, that you're tethered to something else, not just the overworld."

Tommy feels more dread rising. “What’re you on about, Wil?”

“He always took you back. Way before now,” Wilbur says instantly.

“What’d you mean took me back?” Tommy’s shame is exchanged for dread. Wilbur keeps pacing, rambling and unsure. “*Wil!*” Tommy shouts it because he cannot reach out and take his brother’s shoulders, as he had snapped him out of it so many times before in that ravine. Wilbur stops, staring at Tommy with wide eyes. “What’d...” Tommy’s voice shakes again. “What’s happening to me?”

“I– I don’t know, Tommy,” Wilbur stares at him with wide eyes. “But you’re here now. And... I dunno when– *if* he’s taking you back.”

“Y–You said I was fuckin’ *dead*, Wil!” Tommy’s panic only grows.

“You were! Are!” Wilbur says agitatedly. “But you kept on showing up and leaving, Tommy. Dream was doing something! No fucking clue what, but it had to be him, that stupid ghost didn’t see anyone else!”

“You mean he might take me back?!” Tommy reaches out to Wilbur, he wants to grab onto the collar of that stupid jacket and shake him. He still stays just out of reach. “H–He can’t– Don’t let him, Wil, please–”

“You think I have a fucking say in this?! In any of this?!” Wilbur sounds just as haggard as he does. “I have been out of control for so, *so* long. I mean... He pulled you back way before now, Tommy. So maybe, maybe this is it. Maybe it’s over now? I dunno!”

“I thought they were–” Tommy sputters. “They were *nightmares*.”

“Nightmares?” Wilbur scoffs. He freezes, pacing and frustration dying in an instant, his shoulders hunch inward. “...*Nightmares?*”

That voice is different, it’s soft and hurting and scared, he almost sounds like Ghostbur.

“Wil...” Tommy doesn’t know what to say.

“About...” Wilbur trails off. He turns back to face Tommy, looking like he’s holding something back. “Right,” he brushes his face quickly, clearing his throat. Tommy knows what his brother looks like when he’s trying not to cry. “Got it, makes... makes sense.”

Tommy didn’t know what to say. It didn’t seem fair to apologize for having nightmares about Wilbur. Wilbur wasn’t expecting anything like that, he accepted it with more ease than Tommy might have imagined.

“I’m gonna help you, Tommy. Dunno how, but I’m gonna make this better for you,” Wilbur nods. “Promise.”

Tommy wishes he could hug his big brother.

\*\*\*

Five words resonate in Tubbo's head over and over again.

Even as the whole world seems to spin around this one event. Even as Ranboo stays beside him, offering support. Everyone had grown so scattered across the server, but in the proceeding days, everyone comes to terms with this together. Enough that there's this shared look with everyone as they run into each other. Tommy's absence is a dark shadow over the server, despite him being gone from the mainlands long before now.

This understanding is rarely shared with Tubbo. Tubbo gets apologies and hugs and delicate treatment. Tubbo barely spoke, he just nods and those who visit know when to leave. So many people come by. Sam, Puffy, Eret, Jack, Phil, Fundy, Niki, all of them say the same thing. They all say that they're sorry. He's tired of it. Why are they apologizing to him? Tubbo is not the victim here. Far from it.

Dream tries to help. He just keeps talking.

"Where do you think you'll bury him?"

Quackity stares, a little taken aback by his bluntness, by Dream being here and being sympathetic at all. "Uh, I dunno. Not like he can be buried on L'Manberg land anymore, not enough land *left*."

"Maybe somewhere by his house, somewhere quiet." Maybe Dream thinks he's being kind.

Tubbo doesn't want to hear this. Not that it could hurt any more than those five words dragging across his mind like nails on a chalkboard. Maybe it's better than Dream treating him like something breakable. He doesn't know if it makes a difference.

Quackity takes the most initiative. "Yeah, somewhere by his house. I'm gonna... I gotta tell people what happened. I think Jack has already started, he said he'd let people know."

Five words.

Ranboo just stays. He scribbles something down in his notebook for a time, and then he just sits beside him. Tubbo doesn't move. Ranboo had walked him up to the top platform and sat him in the seat behind the podium. He hadn't moved since.

Tubbo no longer knows where to put his anger. Some frantic, protective part of himself wants to put it on Tommy. Easier to hate someone than to love them in grief.

"Hey," Ranboo speaks softly, unsure but kind. "You... I know you're not okay, but... How are you?" Tubbo says nothing. "Considering..."

Those five words continue to pound in the back of his head like a pickaxe to stone.

"We've got things to do," Tubbo stands. "Where..." Tubbo turns to look out over New L'Manberg. The ache in his chest worsens.

"He's at Eret's right now. Him and I think Ponk and Puffy are..." Ranboo takes a shaky breath. "They're getting him cleaned up. For the funeral."

Tubbo nods. He feels like he's going to be sick. All of those bruises, that damaged corpse, frail and *wrong* at his feet, the sight feels burned onto eyelids. That, and the image of Tommy staring at him, waiting for him to protect him as Tubbo stands strong and unwavering and lets Dream take him away.

Tubbo doesn't want to go to the funeral. He's staring down the prime path and from here he can see a procession of mourners, he can see flowers covering Tommy's house, he can see the bench. He stops in his tracks.

"Please, Tubbo. You'll regret not saying goodbye," Ranboo holds his hand the whole time.

They walk forward together. *Your Tommy*. Tommy is laid out on the bench. On top of a L'Manberg flag. His tattered clothes are covered by new ones, or rather old, his L'Manberg uniform, that jacket is closed over the shredded remains of his white and red shirt. There is no blood on him and his hair is clean and the bruises are covered and he is unbroken and safe and whole and *home* but his chest isn't moving or settled right and his eyes are shut and there is *nothing* and there's so much of it and it's filling up every breath of air he takes and the scent of flowers is overpowering the potential for future rot and there is *nothing*. There is nothing left. Tommy is not here.

Tubbo stares at him— at *it*, because that is not his best friend. That empty *thing* is getting buried. That's not Tommy.

If that's the case, then he doesn't know where Tommy is. He doesn't know when he's coming home. Tubbo isn't that far gone, he cannot fit neatly into the delusion that Tommy is alive somewhere, but something close enough that it's easier than taking in the funeral.

Ranboo lays a bundle of alliums on his chest.

Tubbo feels a sob rise in his throat. He buries it. He had screamed himself hoarse that first day. He hadn't cried since.

Sam had already dug the waiting grave. It's at the foot of the cliff in front of the bench. The day is not dark storms or grey rain. The sun is bright and the weather warm. It's peaceful, enough away from the prime path that it won't be overrun by foot traffic, but close enough to their bench and close enough to home that it feels more okay.

None of this feels *okay*.

"Tubbo? Do you want to say a few words?" Puffy puts a gentle hand on his shoulder, as the body— he's so small, he's wrapped in a L'Manberg flag, and Sam and Quackity are so gentle lowering him into the ground but he's so fucking *small*.

Tubbo should say something. He's supposed to say something it's his best friend's goddamn *funeral* for fucks sake if he can't say anything now he won't get the chance to again, once he's buried and gone and there's *nothing* left of him what other speeches are to be made on Tommy's behalf?! What'll be left for Tubbo to do for him, what other ways to repay a debt?

*So many debts and lost promises and plans made and unmade. Was you ordering the exile a speech? Was that decree enough to give Tommy shame as well as honor? Can you honor him now? You, who let him go?*

He can't. He *can't*. Tubbo doesn't know if he'll regret it but he cannot bring himself to speak over Tommy's waiting grave. He shakes his head.

"Oh," Puffy is quick to mask her surprise. "I don't know if I'm... the right person to..."

They're all just staring at each other, and Tubbo is staring at that flag. He doesn't care who speaks.

Someone clears their throat. "Could I..?"

Those who had lived through the darker days, the L'Manberg war and the politics that followed, they exchange looks.

"Someone just fucking say *something*," it's the first Tubbo has spoken all day. "I don't fucking care— just *someone*."

Dream steps forward. "Tommy was so important to everyone who met him. He has been, since the day he arrived here, the key to the server, he came to this place and he cared so much about things, that it was hard for everyone not to care along with him. Tommy was what made the server fun. Without him, it will never be the same, without him, we'll never unlock the full potential of the server again."

So much more could have been said, and so many of those lined up alongside this grave had something to say, but no one else speaks. Still, it's something, maybe even something kind. Enough that the next step came.

They bury him.

Tommy's headstone is simple.

*Here lies Tommyinnit.*

*Soldier, brother, friend.*

*You can let go now.*

Tubbo doesn't know who thought of it, who painstakingly carved it, but he almost hates them. Almost.

Five words.

The others leave, one by one they trail off, until it's just him. The clearing has fallen silent. The sun is setting. And Tubbo is just staring at that headstone, at the freshly redug earth and the flowers and keepsakes left behind. He falls to his knees, and reaches out a trembling hand to brush over the name *Tommy*. He stops himself. He did this, Tubbo knows that *this*



all comes back to him and the choice he made to let Tommy go. Tubbo knows this, but that deep rooted rage, festering and rotting inside of him, it's not just for himself.

"Why'd you do this?" Tubbo says it hoarsely, and it almost sounds like he's expecting an answer. He sounds like he's crying. He's not sure if he is. "W-Why'd you do it? Don't you—" Tubbo chokes out, taking deep shaky breaths to resist sobs. He's shouting, he's *screaming* at a dead boy like there's any hope of catharsis. "Don't you know what this would do?! You *know*— you fucking know how much this hurts the people left behind, Tommy! You know better than *anyone* how bad it is! How could you do this?! A-After Wilbur left us, after everything— *How could you fucking do this?!*" Tubbo is sobbing now, unable to contain it anymore, days of wandering silently in his grief and he's wailing into the cold unforgiving stone like a kid.

He's forgotten that he's *supposed* to be a kid.

"Why, Tommy? *Why?*" Tubbo traces over the letters. He wants to hug his Tommy. "I was gonna get you out of there! Don't you know I was gonna get you out?!"

But Tubbo doesn't know if that's really true. He hates himself worse for it.

Five words.

*You killed your best friend.*

\*\*\*

Tommy stares into the endless void, calm but far from content. "I never really thought about what happens after you die."

Wilbur has just been staring at him, trying to piece together this boy with the image he has of a young soldier. "Not even for me?"

Tommy doesn't feel guilt for this. Not after all this time.

"Nah. Had more important things to think about when it came to you."

Wilbur laughs. A pause, Wilbur reshuffles the cards. "Do you want to try again?"

"What's the fucking point?" Tommy gloomily replies.

"Come on, man, what's the harm?" Wilbur stands, psyching himself up. "It still hurts, doesn't it?"

"... Yes."

"So, try!" Wilbur claps and then extends his hands.

Tommy reaches out to him.

No matter how hard he tries, some distance remains between them.

“*Told* you, Wil, there’s no point,” Tommy pulls back gloomily. “After all this, you’d think you would’ve given up by now.”

“I’ve been here *so* fucking long, Tommy, I already did the giving up bit, so now I’m back to trying!” Wilbur still has some manic sort of energy, despite their very dead circumstances. “Helps when I have company. Other than fucking *Schlatt* and that Mexican Dream guy.”

“Wish MD would visit...”

“Doesn’t work like that, Tommy.”

“Oh, ‘cause *you* know how it does work?”

“Better than you.”

Silence for a time. It could have been hours or days. It doesn’t matter anymore. Tommy tries to let go, to find some way to lose consciousness enough that it doesn’t hurt. That’s what Schlatt does, he lets himself crumble enough that he can sleep eternity away. That sounds nice.

“D’you think he’s ever gonna take me back?” Tommy brings up an old question.

Wilbur shuffles cards. “After all these months? Doubt it.” A pause, the sound of cards fluttering filling up the endless void. “...Do you want him to?”

Tommy takes a moment to think. Another hour could’ve passed. Another three. He doesn’t know. “Sometimes I’m not sure. Not like it matters. I’m here now. It’s been fucking *months*, so, I am... accepting that this is it, I guess.”

Wilbur laughs.

“What?” Tommy grows defensive.

“You uh, you accepted it a lot faster than I did.”

Tommy laughs gruffly. “Funny.”

Wilbur’s turn for puzzlement. “What’s funny?”

“Out of the two of us, you seem like you’d be more willing to accept it.”

Wilbur frowns. “Why’s that?”

“You *chose* this.”

“So did you.”

Tommy hurts in a way that has nothing to do with being torn apart and put back together.

“Yeah. Guess I did.” More silence.

This is how it goes. Conversation drifts and so do they, reconvening hours, even days later. Maybe longer. He doesn't know. It doesn't matter. They just pick off somewhere close to where they left off. "That hurt us, you know."

"What?"

"What you did. You fuckin'... you killed yourself. Left us to pick up the pieces. I never gave up on you, in Pogtopia, through all of it, the rambling, the not eating or sleeping, the way you just got *paranoid*, and I stuck with you through it. And it didn't do shit." He doesn't hate Wilbur. He can't hate him. Bitterness is the only thing that persists, every word barbed and cold. "All that for nothing, huh?"

"I'm sorry." Wilbur's response seems instinctive, unsure. It's not what Tommy wants.

"Why'd you leave us, Wil?"

Wilbur stares down at his cards.

Tommy wishes he were angry. He wants to hate Wilbur for what he did. He can't hate him. He's never been able to hate his brother, despite all he'd done.

"I don't know anymore," Wilbur speaks softly, refusing to meet his eyes.

It's somehow worse that Tommy believes him.

It takes time, it takes *so* much time, but there is an awakening, or not an awakening, but an epiphany.

"I don't want this to be it, Wil."

"What to be it?"

"*This*," he gestures to the void.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Tommy."

Tommy should be numb by now, but right now? Right now he's angry. He's good at anger.

"This can't be it. The afterlife. This can't be *it*."

"You get a say in that, do you?" Wilbur says with dry amusement. He's been through these cycles a hundred times over himself. It's different to see it move through someone else's head.

"It's not fair, is what it is," Tommy stares into the black, trying to see something, *anything*. "Things haven't been fuckin' *fair* for me maybe ever."

Wilbur does what he can. "I know, Tommy. I kept on thinking there had to be more than... more than this," he stares dully around his train station. "But I'm sorry, there is *nothing*,

man. I've tried. I've pounded my fists against the walls until they were bloody, and it has done *nothing*."

"So, you have walls," Tommy scoffs. "I'm tired of shit being unfair for me. I deserve better than— than— I deserve better than fucking *nothing*." Tommy wishes he could pace, but to pace he'd need something to hold onto.

"I've been thinking about L'Manberg lately," Tommy continues, regardless of Wilbur's lack of enthusiasm.

"Oh?"

"I fought and fucking died for it, over and over, and I didn't even get to keep it. I died *alone*. I died exiled from my home. I never got to keep *anything*. I don't care what they think of me, I'm not a bad person, Wil. I'm *not*. I dunno if I'm a good one either, but that's got to count for something."

If Tommy could jump to his feet, he would.

"I want to try again, Wil."

"What?"

"I want to try again," Tommy nods sharply, reaching out a hand. He feels like he's covered in pins and needles, pain is a second skin to him by now. He's tired of it.

Wilbur looks at it doubtfully.

"You still feel like you're falling?"

Tommy nods again. "I'm pretty sure I've fallen further than the world is wide."

Wilbur sighs and gets to his feet, reaching a hand out to Tommy. They're face to face. Tommy isn't grounded, he doesn't know how it works, but there's enough control that he can look his brother in the eye, however reluctant he may seem. It's Wilbur's turn to give up, and it's Tommy's turn to try.

*Pain.*

New, different, *blinding* pain. There's suddenly *light* and he can *feel* Wilbur's hand in his and he's not falling anymore he hits the ground— because there's a *ground* — and collapses to the floor, unaccustomed to standing.

"*Tommy?!!*" Wilbur shouts in surprise, catching him before he can hit the platform.

"W-Wilbur?!" Tommy feels tears on his cheeks, he reaches clumsy, grasping hands forward, trying to hold on, he wraps his arms around Wilbur's neck and clings for dear life or death. He holds so tight he knows he must be hurting him, but he doesn't care, he can *feel* him, that stupid brown coat and that messy hair and he still smells like cigarettes but who fucking *cares* because he can *smell* again and there's light and there's *ground* and Wilbur is hugging

him back, he's wrapping his arms around him and scooping him up and pulling him closer, shushing him softly as Tommy sobs into his shoulder. "I- I'm here, oh my fucking god, Wil, I- I did it! I did it, Wil!"

"You did it, you're okay, Tommy."

If Tommy didn't know any better, he'd say Wilbur was crying too.

"D-Don't let go, okay?"

"I won't. Okay? I won't, Tommy, I promise. I've got you," Wilbur squeezes tight. "I've got you."

Tommy almost can't comprehend the relief of being held by his brother after so much time untethered.

Then pain returns.

*"Wake up."*

## Chapter End Notes

Sad-ist's animatic knocked me out with the clingyduo feelings so I had to make it worse <3 thanks for reading! as always, feedback is cherished.

Also: as for Tommy changing his limbo, I read some really cool meta about how limbo is what people think they deserve, like that's how Jack crawled out of it. So Tommy realizing it's not fair is what he needed to make it better!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

While I know this isn't how it works in canon, I've decided the longer Tommy is dead the worse his memory becomes of being dead and of dying. Roll with it for me.

And regarding the timeline, the day the Butcher Army would have happened is the same day Dream showed up with Tommy's corpse. Hard to plan a funeral and go after an enemy. There are other tiny timeline things I wiggled around for storytelling reasons, but y'know my fic my rules!

WARNING: this chapter continues with dark themes. It is especially heavy on dehumanization, human experimentation, manipulation, gaslighting, etc. A section is from Dream's POV which factors into that. Read with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun had set hours ago, and still Tubbo stays on his knees in front of that gravestone.

Dream is a patient man, but irritation rises.

*What're you doing? He's dead. He can't do anything for you anymore, so go on. Get out of here.*

Dream stays in no man's land, hiding behind one of the few sparse remaining trees. He writes in his journal, and he watches the young president of New L'Manberg with something less than dislike. Dream did not dislike a fly that had found itself trapped in his home. It was an annoyance at best. Tubbo shows no sign of moving.

Dream would've cut off the kid's head and dumped his corpse in the soon to be empty grave if it meant this would go faster, but that wasn't the *point* of all this. There would be no foul play here. Tommy would stay dead in the eyes of everyone. No one bothers to check up on a dead kid, no one questions the state of a corpse that's supposed to be six feet under. Dream had already made good work stopping visitors, but this would be the last nail in the coffin. Dream almost laughs behind his mask. *Nail in the coffin*. He had been the one to suggest Tommy be buried wrapped in the flag, just as he had suggested he be buried away from New L'Manberg. No prying eyes, no coffin to break into.

Easy.

If Tubbo would just fucking get up and go home.

The majority of the Greater SMP is well lit by now, but Dream stands far enough back into the dark he can see a few mobs wandering aimlessly through the area. It's been hours. He's

tired of waiting. Dream takes the blunt of his axe, shoving a zombie away, trying to force it in Tubbo's direction, then he goads a skeleton into firing that way as well. Then he waits.

Tubbo jumps away from the grave, startled, scrambling for his sword.

*"Go on. He's not worth it, leave him,"* Dream mutters under his breath, watching carefully with glittering eyes from the dark.

Tubbo backs away from the grave as the zombie comes closer, not wanting the candles and flowers to get trampled by unforgiving and undead weight.

Dream takes note of that. He'll have to replace everything correctly if Tubbo is so sentimental as to care about the gifts left behind. The whole server is probably that pathetically sentimental. *Attachments* and all that.

*"Fucking finally. Run. Be glad it's just a zombie you little rat,"* Dream takes a step forward as Tubbo heads towards the western edge of the cliff, trying to find a stable enough patch to return to the light of the prime path.

He waits in the silence for minutes more, just to be sure nothing else stirs. He's a viper waiting to strike, his whole body tense, not a breath stirring the air around him as he listens. Even out from behind the tree he had chosen to hide, if anyone were to walk by through the light, no one would notice the stillness of a shadow slightly darker than the rest. The moon is covered with clouds on a night like this. He listens a minute more. Nothing. Only now does he approach the grave, a hunter approaching its prey. He tilts his head, staring down at the freshly turned earth with an amused huff, rereading the epitaph.

*Here lies Tommyinnit.*

*Soldier, brother, friend.*

*You can let go now.*

"Not if I have anything to say about it..."

Dream kneels down, taking a moment to memorize the little trinkets and weak consolations given to the dead. He blows out the candles, tossing them aside, next the flowers he handles more delicately, petals oh so breakable, he scoffs at the compass placed in front of the stone. It's helpful that Tubbo had decided to leave this for his best friend. It could've been a wrench in Dream's plans if Tubbo had one day checked it to see the needle very much still turning. This part is more delicate, but Dream is in no rush as he gently slides a knife underneath the glass, prying it free without leaving a scratch. He carefully lifts the needle and scrapes away the tiny runes painstakingly carved by Ghostbur on the back. He replaces the needle. It merely points towards North, the enchantment no longer glowing. Perfect. If Tubbo questions the magic dying, surely it can be excused by the death of its host. He sets it aside with the flowers.

Now for the more difficult part. Not especially so, Dream has a decent shovel, but it's still work.

“Fucking Sam digging a deep grave, maybe I should’ve risked cremation...” He huffs irritatedly. He has to be careful now, he doesn’t want to damage the corpse any more. If he accidentally takes off a finger that may be problematic. Dirt gives way to cloth. Dream can see one of L’Manberg’s three x’s. “*There* you are...” he exhales, tossing aside the shovel, picking up his charge and tossing him onto the grass alongside it. Dream jumps easily back onto stable ground, crouching down beside him. He’s been past the point of no return long before now, but he still looks over his shoulder, scanning for a witness to put in the empty grave before he fills it in. The night stays silent and Tommy’s exhumation unwitnessed.

Dream pulls aside the flag. Tommy doesn’t look as neat and pretty as he did at the funeral. He’s covered in dirt, it filling his open mouth and dusting his eyelashes. Helpful. Dream would have no answer for him if he were suddenly clean and polished after so much time filthy and haggard in exile. Someone had covered his bloody clothes with his L’Manberg coat. That won’t do. Dream sits him up, his neck is limp and his head lolls lifelessly against Dream’s shoulder. He removes the jacket like one would with a doll before letting Tommy fall back with a dull thud, head landing at an unnatural angle, bones broken at time of death. He tosses the coat back in the grave along with the flag.

Dream gives him another once over, wiping some of the makeup from his neck, where Eret and Puffy had so carefully concealed bruises Dream himself had made. He was glad they were messy, bruises from a broken neck hiding the older ones in the shape of handprints. *That* he couldn’t have excused with a suicide.

“You just wait a little longer, Tommy. Gotta clean up first,” Dream pats his cold and stiff cheek before setting to work replacing the dirt, shoveling in more to replace the spot that Tommy’s body had occupied, brushing it from the grass meticulously. It takes another few minutes for him to replace the candles and flowers, the compass finally taking its place center stage on the grave. Dream stands, admiring his handiwork. No witnesses. No evidence. The grave is as pristine as it had been at the burial.

Dream throws the body over his shoulder, making his way towards the main portal. He’s up the cliffside when he reconsiders. Why carry dead weight?

Dream tosses him on the ground behind Tommy’s precious little bench. This part might be fun.

Dream scribbles down a few more notes in his journal, before retrieving a far more precious book.

He wakes Tommy with a slap beside the bench.

“Wake up.”

Tommy jolts up with a scream, Dream immediately grabs him, holding on tightly and covering his mouth.

“Quiet! Do you want to wake up the whole server?!” He hisses. He can feel Tommy struggling in his hold, trying to speak or maybe he’s hyperventilating, wide grey eyes– they were blue, Dream swore they were *blue* before– flitting around panickedly. Tommy starts



gagging. Dream pulls back, Tommy coughing harshly and spitting out dirt into the grass with a shudder.

Tommy seems more disoriented than anything. Then he sees the bench. “Oh god, oh *fuck*—”

“Tommy, I said shut up!” Dream covers his mouth again. “What the hell are you doing here? You know I should kill you for being here, you know I should hurt you, but I don’t want to do that.”

Tommy can’t catch his breath, he doesn’t know how he got here, he doesn’t know what happened, he thinks he’s losing his mind, the last thing he remembers is split in two, conflicting memories: one, building a tower, and two, his big brother holding him.

Now, there’s cool night air and it stings his skin and his whole body *aches*, he feels stiff and sore and he’s so cold why is he so cold why is there dirt all over him—

Tommy tries to speak, but he’s choking on his words.

“Answer me, Tommy,” Dream doesn’t give him time to think, urgent anger exchanged for a cool, demanding tone. “What’re you doing here?”

“D-Don’t— I d-don’t unders-stand—” Tommy stammers out hoarsely. His head his pounding and his head feels so jumbled up and distorted he can’t make any sense of it.

Dream tilts his head, that mask blank and eerie and *watching* and Tommy feels like it’s eating into him, like he’s rotting, and the night air, the scent of grass and the dim light from the lanterns lining the prime path— how did he *get* here?! How the fuck did he— it’s all too much too much too much—

“Hm,” Dream’s calm voice snaps him out of it, just as violent as a slap. His tone is cool and patronizing now, no more bloody anger, but a parent scolding a child, an owner scolding a dog for tearing up a shoe. “Tsk tsk. You broke the biggest rule we have, Tommy, but you know what? I’ll be lenient. We’ll go back to Logstedshire, and how about I just destroy your supplies? And no more hunting for a few days, going hungry for a bit, that’s more than fair.”

Tommy can only make sense of one thing. Dream is in control, and Tommy knows how badly that can hurt. “You’re not gonna… you’re not gonna kill me?” (hurt, he meant to say *hurt*, but that word comes out instead and he isn’t sure why, Tommy feels like it’s supposed to be a different sort of pleading—)

“No, Tommy! I’m not gonna kill you. I want us to still hang out, even if you shouldn’t have come here,” Dream sounds *fond*.

Tommy clings to the only anchor he has. He misses his big brother. “Thank you Dream- oh my god, *thank you*.” Weak with relief, knowing it could’ve been so, *so* much worse. “I-I know you said he doesn’t c-care about me anymore, but… I can’t die out here, I can’t do that to Tubbo. I’m trying to obey the rules, Dream— I am still just so so sorry, thank you— I can’t let Tubbo think I died in exile. I *can’t*. He’ll think it’s his fault.”

Dream smiles behind his mask and ruffles Tommy's filthy hair, before taking his hand and helping him to his feet. Tommy immediately collapses with a yelp, his legs weak and unsteady. Dream doesn't let go.

He guides Tommy away from his own grave which he just barely can't see over the hill.

"Sure thing, Tommy. Now, if something like this happens again, I'll have to punish you worse, but for now, we'll just take care of your supplies," he keeps his arm around Tommy, a vice, not a comfort.

Tommy nods quickly, desperate to show he understood.

*Why can't you remember remember remember remember—*

"I- I dunno how I got here, Dream. I'm so so sorry, the last thing I remember—" Tommy goes silent. The last thing he remembers is planning to make a tower. *And Wilbur. But that can't be real, that can't have been real—*

"It's okay, Tommy. I'm taking you home."

As he says this, Tommy looks back at that dirt house in the hill, longing indescribable, and for a moment it's like there's something in that house staring back, and in that split second Tommy's heart, beating on frantically without understanding why, is begging the past: *help me.*

The walk back Tommy tries to piece together his jumbled thoughts, but he's too overwhelmed by *feeling*. He hasn't felt this much in so *so* long— *how long? How do you know? HOW LONG?*— so he can only focus on taking one step forward and then another, Dream's hand on his arm is the only thing keeping him standing most of the time.

When they return to Logstedshire, there is no tower, no sign at all of what had occurred. Tommy remembers building the tower. He remembers that much, but it isn't here and it's blurry after that, and if he somehow woke up outside his old house... is he blacking out? Sleepwalking? He doesn't know. He remembers Wilbur. He remembers Wilbur telling him things, things that don't make sense anymore. Tommy just wishes he could understand *something*. He feels like he's losing his mind.

Dream says something.

Tommy hears him vaguely but he's too lost staring at the blackness of the ocean, extending without end. That void is so familiar to him now...

"*Tommy,*" Dream snaps him out of it, grabbing his shoulder and forcing him to turn around to face him. It's hard to read behind a mask, but he seems to be expecting something.

"...Wot?" Tommy blinks, trying to focus, but that vacant smile and those empty eyes aren't the same as a real proper *face*, like the face of his brother, telling him, *Dream's been doing something.*

Dream sighs, irritated. "I *asked* how you feel."

“F-Fine,” Tommy feels jumpy, unsure, clouded. He remembers this isn’t the answer Dream wants. It feels like months ago. “I- I mean, I feel cold right now. Like, *really* cold, in my bones ‘n shit. I’m sore all over and- and my fingers are all stiff and fumbly. Y’know I still got a limp from before when I broke—”

“I don’t care about before, Tommy. Focus on now,” Dream has that little notebook out. Tommy stares at it.

He just wants to understand.

“*Tommy*,” Dream hits him upside the head, it’s hardly a hit, Tommy’s suffered way worse, but the sting seems to ring through his skull, his nerves protesting their sudden use, signals misfiring until it’s just *pain just pain just pain*—

“I won’t ask you again,” Dream says sharply.

“H-Hurts,” Tommy croaks out. He can’t stop staring at that notebook. He can’t read it from here and he knows better than to step closer.

“Hurts *how*?” Dream presses.

“Like I got a second skin on, like the air— like fuckin’ *everything* won’t stop touching me,” Tommy mutters. He shivers. There’s a cold salty breeze coming off the water, and despite his discontent, he’d missed fresh air.

*Missed it? How long have you been without it?*

“D-Dream?” Tommy stares out into the black of the water. “C-Can I ask you something?”

“If you answer things for me first, maybe,” Dream says shortly.

“Oh.”

Dream sighs, pausing in his writing, debating something in his head. “What is it, Tommy?”

“How long was I out? Or... gone or whatever that was.”

Dream contemplates him for a moment. Tommy wants to step back. “How long do *you* think you were gone?”

Tommy feels gripped by panic. There’s a wrong and a right answer. He doesn’t know. “F-Felt like forever. Felt like I was in this fucking hellish void *forever*.”

Dream laughs dryly. “I was hoping for a *time frame*, Tommy. Did it feel like... days?”

“Months.”

“*Months*?”

“Y-Yeah, it felt like months,” Tommy finally stumbles back. He begins pulling on his hair. The pain is familiar. He remembers losing his second skin of pins and needles and the feeling of being torn apart and pieced back together and instead he felt Wilbur’s arms around him and for a split second he thought he was okay—

“Don’t be stupid, Tommy. It was a couple days,” Dream scoffs, writing furiously. A pause, “I’ve been looking for you nonstop. You really scared me, Tommy.”

“I’m sorry, Dream. I’m sorry I’m sorry—” Tommy stumbles back further, like any of this is something he can get away from. He can barely keep steady on his legs. “It was months, it *had* to have been months it felt like forever maybe fucking *years* I dunno and Wil said— W— Wil said—” Tommy cuts himself off sharply.

“...Wilbur said what?” Dream asks. There’s something dangerous in his tone. Months away, and Tommy still remembers the mark that tone can leave.

Tommy does not weigh his options. He cannot think of a single lie to tell Dream to make this go away. What can Dream do? *Kill* him? Tommy turns back to that white mask, his jaw set and tense. He can feel his own pulse in his stomach. “He told me I was dead.”

A moment of silence, him and Dream just staring at each other. Tommy can’t see his eyes, but he knows they’re locked on his. Maybe for a second, thinking of Wilbur on his side, he feels brave.

Dream tucks away his notebook and steps forward, slow and methodical, towering over him. Tommy’s bravery shrivels and dies. Dream tilts his head and places a hand on Tommy’s shoulder.

“Oh, *Tommy*,” Dream doesn’t sound angry, he sounds soft and pitying. “You’ve really been out here for too long, haven’t you? I’m sorry, I should’ve been around more before now. I mean, the blackouts, the running off into trouble, the nightmares, and now *this*? It’s more than a little worrying. I mean, *delusional* is the only way I can think to describe it. If you were dead, then what’s this, Tommy? Some *afterlife*?” Dream laughs. “No, Tommy.” Dream presses a hand against his chest. “Feel that?” Tommy’s heart beats frantically against the inside of his chest, a caged bird trying to flee from between his ribs. It isn’t supposed to be here. “Hearts still beating in there. Don’t you worry. I won’t let it stop.”

If it had been anger, Tommy would’ve had something to hold onto, something to fight or cower behind depending on how bad it got, but *pity*? Tommy has nothing.

“Am I going fuckin’ insane?” Tommy asks hoarsely.

“I don’t know, Tommy. But no matter what happens, I’ll be here, alright?” Dream then does something that scares Tommy more than anything else to happen that night. He pulls Tommy into a hug. When Tommy cries this time, it isn’t relief, it’s not Wilbur pulling him out of the dark, Tommy sobs into Dream’s shoulder because there’s no other way he can manifest the surreal terror that grips him. His eyes stay open, staring out at the blackened sea. Everything about this is *wrong* and there is nothing he can do about it, he cannot run nor fight and no one is going to come and save him. There is no peace, because Dream *lets* him, Dream lets him

hug back and get tears on his shirt and this doesn't *hurt*. Tommy shouldn't feel *more* afraid that it doesn't hurt.

Dream pulls away with a gentle pat to his shoulder. "Now, Tommy. We should get this out of the way, you've had a hard enough night."

Tommy steps back. "...What?" Tommy looks at Dream's hands, expecting to see a sword. Nothing.

"I've still got to burn the rest of your stuff," Dream says it like it's obvious. "You should be used to it by now, Tommy! Maybe some old routine will be good for you."

Tommy remembers now, his storeroom destroyed, mushroom Henry dead, Dream taking all of his food. All Tommy had had left was something to build a tower...

Dream starts a fire, he presses down on Tommy's shoulder until he's forced to sit beside it. The brightness of the flames blind him. He's been in the dark for *so long* until Wilbur pulled him out—

Dream tosses Tommy's meager tools onto the fire, he walks back into Logstedshire, continuing to empty the chests Ghostbur had made alongside his little house.

"Aw, Ghostbur left you soup! That's sweet," Dream keeps on chatting, lighthearted and self satisfied. All of it goes onto the fire. Tommy is almost too broken down to feel pained by the sight.

"Now, is there any more food? Anything else I should be burning?" Dream has his arms folded over his chest, scolding and teasing, waiting for Tommy to slip up.

"N-No," Tommy is still lost in his own head, Wilbur's dead words refusing to leave him be as he stares into the fire, the scent of charring meat, boiling broth, making his stomach ache with the hunger to come. Tommy had forgotten how many kinds of suffering there were.

"Are you *sure*?" Dream mocks.

"I can... I can check," Tommy goes to his few chests in the tent. It's not like he had much to begin with.

"Let me," Dream pushes past him and begins emptying the chest into his inventory, placing his own objects in there instead to make room. Dream would burn everything he had.

"C-Come on, man, that's just junk!" Tommy follows after him, desperation irritating Dream easily.

"Quit *whining*, you should be dead in the ground!" Dream is teasing him, throwing stacks of wood and a meager supply of iron into the blaze.

"S-Sorry, I just—" Tommy wants to keep protesting. He bottles it as everything he had left burns.

“I think that’s the last of it,” Dream sighs. “Hey, don’t look so gloomy. It’s *cleansing*, right? And it’s just a few days, then I’ll give you something to eat. People fast, right? Think of it like that! You’re *atoning*. I’ll see you tomorrow, Tommy.”

“W-Wait!” Tommy all but shouts at him.

Dream freezes. A threat. “What’s that, Tommy?”

“S-Sorry, I just– Please don’t leave. Please, I can’t be alone right now. J-Just one night I am *begging* you, I can’t be alone out here!” Tommy doesn’t want to cry again, he stumbles forward like he wants to hold onto Dream before quickly thinking better of it.

“Hm,” Dream contemplates him, seeming amused. “You’re in trouble, Tommy. I shouldn’t be rewarding this.”

“I-I know but if you go, I am so fucking scared I won’t know where I am when I wake up,” desperate, frustrated tears. “Please don’t leave me alone again. I’ll– I’ll– Y-You can take the food away for longer, o-or whatever you want just stay tonight–”

Dream laughs. “Okay, fine, *fine*, no need to be so pathetic. Just for tonight.”

They stay by the fire, Dream leaning up against a log and Tommy curled up a bit away from the flames. The warmth is too much.

Tommy lays awake, waiting. For hours he stares out into the dark with wide eyes. The faint light from the fire gives enough shape to the world that he cannot disillusion himself into thinking he’s still in that void, into thinking Wilbur will somehow come save him. Eventually he gets up, “Dream?” He has to test it, despite knowing if he woke Dream it could result in punishment, he pushes the thought aside because if he gets caught doing what he’s planning he’ll be lucky to just receive a beating.

Dream hadn’t retrieved his objects from the chest. Dream wasn’t careless, this was not a mistake or a slip of the mind, Tommy had not outwitted him in any way, but Dream was not infallible, he was too trusting of the broken shape he’d moulded Tommy into. He knew with utter, encompassing certainty that Tommy would never try and steal from him, unless he had a death wish. Thankfully, Tommy does. And he remembered what was in there.

The book Dream had been writing in for weeks. Wilbur had told him, Dream was doing *something*. Tommy needed to know what. To at least know what he was losing his mind *for*. He knows answers are within reach, even if it kills him to get them.

Tommy glances back out of his tent to the dimming fire, Dream’s figure remains unmoving. It is silent except for the dull roar of the waves, the canvas of the tent fluttering in the breeze. It feels like whispering, it feels loud enough to cover the sound of footsteps making their way across the grass.

Now or never.

There's blood on the side of the pages. His trembling hands brush over them in the pale moonlight from outside. He opens to the first page.

The first two lines are hastily scrawled, jumpy in either excitement or rush. He doesn't understand at first.

*"Conscious again, mild pain. Hard to gauge intensity since he whines so much anyway.*

*Saw Wilbur. Said it was 'familiar', will investigate further."*

Cold dread.

The next notes are steadier, written after the fact.

*"It worked. It fucking worked. The idiot stood too close to the blast and broke his neck getting thrown back. So I used it. Schlatt's book. Currently have several copies spread to different locations. He showed, " underlined furiously. "The god showed and brought him back. Tommy said it felt like a dream. Funny, in a way. He doesn't realize what happened. Now that I know it works I'm going to keep it that way. He seems susceptible to answering questions, of course he is, I've been training him already. Other opportunities are cropping up. Will wait for the right moment."*

*"He got himself trapped. I'm waiting on the edge of where he fell. I've been checking in regularly whenever he stopped screaming for too long. Couldn't look too much in case he believes I'm here (so far he seems unsure) but there was a lot of blood which is a good sign. He should be dead within hours.*

*Mobs got him. His screams sound different from when he was trying to take care of his injuries, these were sharper. I knew it would be over soon. I did look since he was too busy to notice me. Put up a pretty good fight too considering he had a broken leg. Took three zombies to get him to stay down. Retrieval was more irritating, had to drag him out of the hole. Probably would've been easier if he were still alive, but worth it I think. Slower deaths are fascinating and hard to come by."*

*"study on starvation postponed as food rewards have been necessary. Significant progress with obedience. Should be ready to go without food within a few weeks."*

*"There's a disconnect with memory. Or it's just easy to change his perception of reality. I've killed him a few times, drowned him, and when he comes back he's just confused. It may have to do with how long he's been dead. Next time I'll wait until rigor mortis sets in to see if his memory changes."*

*"He thinks he's just fainting. This time he actually did faint, but since he wasn't conscious to remember, I broke his neck. I want to know if snapping the spinal chord changes the feeling that returns when he wakes up.*

*Neck hurt when he came back, but no irregularities. May try again."*

*"It's getting harder not to tell him. He doesn't fully comprehend his life is mine. Sometimes I just want to strangle him and tell him why it doesn't matter. Regardless, better not to taint the results with him knowing. This is way more interesting (dare I say fun? When he gets all panicked, looking to me to make his reality, how can that not be fun?) It doesn't matter. He doesn't need to know I'm a god to worship me."*

Tommy should've stopped reading right then. He doesn't need any more horror than those words burned into his eyes, *he doesn't need to know I'm a god to worship me.*

He reads on.

*"Need to put some more work into obedience training. He broke today. I fixed him. Thought I killed him at first, but still alive just unconscious. Will continue food deprivation outside of what I give to further dependency."*

*"Self inflicted wounds. Jumped. I was later than usual. Could pose an interesting opportunity, ensure the others stop visiting as long as I can retrieve the corpse. MUST make sure they don't consider cremation. I wonder what risks there are to putting off the revival? Could lead to long term damage, nerves etc."*

*"Waiting to regain access to the corpse. Taking longer than expected. Too many unpredictable variables, but this is supposed to fix that. No more people looking for him. One more night of waiting for that stupid pawn to leave, then no more trouble with him, no more asking about Tommy all the fucking time. May experiment with post-mortem conditions. Test without corpse available? Burn it? (risky)"*

Notes more rushed, dirt smearing the page and the ink. *"Corpse mostly intact on recovery. Will revive on site for easier transport. Location secluded enough for no witnesses."*

*"Long term death extends the perception of time by months. Told him it had only been a few days (true) and established that his dreams must be tricking him etc. was believed. No abnormal signs of suspicion yet. He knows better than to ask questions by now."*

*Decay reverted much like health potions to a wound. He's hurting from it. May be irrelevant due to old bruising and/or broken bones from death wound. Rigor mortis may play a factor. He felt cold <- (another reason to consider burning— see if method of death effects experience, again, risk factors to consider) his eyes are mostly grey now, they were a fading blue before. Not sure if it's worse from the death or continued outcome of exile."*

*"Obedience may be less of an issue. He's scared of me leaving him after I threatened to do so. Must monitor closely, provide rewards, rationed positive reinforcement, food, rest, agreeing to stay, etc. Never enough that he gets used to—"*

*"What are you looking at, Tommy?"*



Ok things are picking up :D Sorry to leave you guys on a cliffhanger but how could I not?

Thanks for reading and as always, feedback is cherished <3

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

oooh I've had this chapter planned for MONTHS I am Very excited.

Graphic Depictions of Violence abound.

BUT: we get 3/4 SBI this one so :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream is completely calm. No anger or violence yet. That's so much worse. "I don't remember giving you my book. It's rude to pry, you know."

Chills shudder down Tommy's spine, *terror* feels too weak a word for what leaves him frozen in place, still staring down at that neat, slanted handwriting. Tommy is so scared it's like the words have been pulled from his lungs, he wants to say *what the fuck is this? You sick bastard- what did you do to me?!*

Only this petrified choking noise comes out.

"Oh, *Tommy*, are you embarrassed?" Dream chastises him, cool and taunting. "I already knew you were a little thief. No need to act like this is anything new."

Tommy can hear Dream stepping closer, maybe to try and get in his line of sight, maybe he's going to grab him, Tommy stumbles out of the tent either way. Tommy lets out a low whine, struggling to take a breath. He turns around, dropping the book and staggering further away.

The portal is on the other side of the tent.

Dream walks forward, slow and leisurely. He stops and picks up the book, wiping dirt from its cover. "Come on, Tommy. You should be more respectful of things that don't belong to you. I mean, *I* can break what's mine, but *you* can't. Not to say you haven't already," he laughs.

Tommy stares past Dream at the faint glow of purple. If he even makes it to the portal, he'll need time to go through. He doesn't have that kind of time. Dream stares at him, voice softer now. "Did you find something you didn't want to see?" Every word hushed and dangerous. He takes a step closer. Tommy takes another step back, even as it puts more distance between him and his escape.

*Escape.* It's not just a longshot, it's a joke. But what else is he supposed to do?

“Don’t look so *scared*, Tommy,” Dream laughs. “I mean, it’s not like I’m gonna *kill* you. Or I guess, it won’t *matter*, at least.”

Tommy tries to circle towards the beach. He doesn’t want the water at his back, but Dream is closer to the other side, this is the most direct way to the portal.

“What’s your *plan*, here, Tommy? You gonna run? Try and fight me?” Dream laughs, “*kill* yourself?”

Tommy feels the surf reach him, soaking his shoes. Dream is in no rush. Say he makes it to the portal, the time it would take to get through would be more than enough for Dream to catch up, follow him through at *best*, drag him out far more likely. He has to try. Dream is closer now, Tommy keeps stumbling further down the beach, he yelps as he steps back into ash, the hot cinders of the fire enough to burn.

“Come on, Tommy. Don’t hurt yourself,” Dream is too calm, he’s close enough to hit him, that book still in his left hand, an axe in his right.

Tommy had to at least know he tried. Tommy grabs a fistful of hot cinders, not caring as they burned into his hand, that pain infinitesimal now, he lunged forward, knowing he couldn’t just throw them in the man’s face, to do any damage beyond a mask, the only unarmored part he can reach is Dream’s throat. Dream shouts in surprise, staggering back as hot coals burn into his neck. Tommy is already running for the portal.

Tommy makes it. He actually makes it, he’s standing *in the portal* and the world begins to blur—

Then there’s a hand grabbing a fistful of his hair and dragging him back out, throwing him to the ground. Tommy gasps, the wind knocked out of him. Dream is holding an axe over him. Tommy shuts his eyes, covering his head. At least he’ll get to see Wilbur for a bit—

Tommy screams, voice hoarse and broken. He’s still alive. Why is it *worse* when he’s still alive— There’s blood on the *blunt* side of Dream’s axe. Tommy looks down at his left leg, shattered once again.

“Ha, I remember this one! You wouldn’t stop fucking *screaming* for me,” Dream crouches down beside him, head tilted, empty black painted eyes pick him apart. “I could’ve saved you, you know,” he says it softly now, calm and teasing. “Well, you know that by now, if you read it. Every time you died, it was because I let you. Every time you came back, it was because I pulled you out. I don’t think you really understand what that *means*, Tommy. But don’t you worry, I’ll teach you.”

Tommy cannot speak, he’s gasping for breath, making no effort to look at or bandage his broken leg, only lean away from Dream over him. Dream stands back up, Tommy flinching as he does, covering his head, waiting for the next kick, but Dream keeps walking. First he goes to the portal. Tommy whimpers at the sound of it shattering like glass.

“You’re not going *anywhere*, Tommy. Not ever again,” Dream says cheerily. He has *tnt* in his right hand.

He begins trailing it across camp, first in the tent, then he heads further towards Logstedshire. Dream is hardly paying attention to Tommy now, he knows there's no way he can run on a broken leg. He leaves him struggling to catch his breath on the beach.

He doesn't see Tommy crawling towards the water, reaching towards it in the red light of an early dawn. The water is darkened to blood by the beginnings of the sun, soon to darken further from Tommy's bloodied leg. He struggles to drag himself forward, his dead leg protesting as it drags through wet sand.

Drowning isn't a painless death. Tommy knows he's had worse. His lungs burn, his body panics, death never growing familiar enough that he doesn't thrash and bolts of adrenaline send him writhing, but that's not what scares him. He's terrified of someone dragging him out of the water before he dies. His vision grows spotted and his lungs ache like they're about to burst, salt water floods them and he tries to breathe it in faster even as it hurts, even as his body protests and his mouth tastes of blood—

For once that eerie blackness is a relief. He doesn't need to find Wilbur, but maybe by luck in that hour or so in the dark he sees Wilbur's face.

*“Did you run? Did you get out? Why are you here again?”*

Tommy wants to tell him *I'm trying* but before he can there's red sky above him and water ejecting from his lungs, his breath rattles as he vomits up sea water.

The sun is still rising.

He hears Dream laughing. “Oh, *Tommy*, you really tried to kill yourself again? I knew you were stupid, but this is getting a little excessive.”

Tommy ignores him, he has no idea if this will have worked and there's every chance for it to go wrong, but Dream leaves his side and continues to place *tnt*, monologuing and scolding him, but Tommy doesn't care what he has to say anymore. It's not useful, as long as he can hear how close Dream is. Tommy looks down.

His leg is no longer broken.

Tommy feels something like relief, desperate hope, this dire drive begging and thanking everything in the known universe that he can run.

Dream will light the *tnt* eventually.

Tommy will run then.

“I told you you needed to start over, Tommy!” Dream still doesn't shut the fuck up. “Now you'll *have* to. Maybe this is a good thing! No more secrets, no more tiptoeing around things, remember what I told you, Tommy? You owe me your life a hundred times over! See? I wasn't exaggerating!” Dream's excitement seems genuine. That's all the more terrifying. “Almost there, Tommy. I'd tell you to be careful, but if you get blown up too—easy fix, right?” He laughs.

*You've got to run. You've got to get up and run the moment it starts—*

Tommy covers his ears as the explosions rattle in his chest, eyes shut tight as the cruel familiarity of the sound floods him with adrenaline. He wants to stay curled on the ground, to hide from the thunderous violence ringing around him. He forces himself to open his eyes, smoke is in the air and Dream stands over his reckoning. His back is to Tommy. Tommy staggers to his feet, he's shaking, he can barely think, but every fiber of his being says one thing—

*Run.*

He's sprinting for the treeline, his whole body already sore and his lungs already burning from the choked air. He's weaving through the trees in an instant, he knows Dream will follow, he'll try and shoot him down—

Tommy staggers, gasping as there's a searing pain in his ribs. He stumbles again, grabbing onto a tree and looks down at the arrow now poking through him. It's far enough over that it's survivable, just a graze, really. He's had worse. He just has to keep running, this moment of hesitation cannot be what does him in. He's struggled through worse.

The more pressing concern about the wound is what it's done to him— a spectral arrow. Tommy *glows*.

His destination hadn't changed, but he's now lost his backup plan of hiding in the woods. He *cannot* hide from this. So he runs towards snow.

It's so *so* far, in this condition it is *agonizingly* far. He scrambles uphill, crying out as another arrow comes close enough to cut his ear. He keeps running. He cannot even pause to look back. He doesn't need to. He knows Dream is following.

Tommy can hear him, too close and too dangerous—

*"Oh, Tommy!"*

He keeps running, every hoarse gasp for air hurts worse and the arrow sends sharp pain rippling up his side, but the air has gotten colder and now he's running over snow, it's burning his feet, one shoe missing, the spruce are thick and he's tearing through them even as they cut into him right back and he knows he can't be sure he's going the right direction but he can only keep running forward, still trying to cut through the trees, never running in a straight line, he refuses to be another easy shot for Dream, but he's close he *has* to be close by now— Tommy slams through the last of the spruce, branches scratching his face, and in the distance he sees him— *he can see him*, a pink figure in a red cloak.

*"Techno!"* Tommy screams his name with the last of his strength, still running forward, almost daring to feel relief, snow slowing his progress but he's *here*, he's going to make it, he's going to—

Techno isn't often surprised, and Tommy running out of the woods screaming his name like his life depends on it almost counts as such. What follows definitely does, because before

Technoblade can reply, in that split second between Tommy continuing his rambling and Techno rolling his eyes, scolding Tommy for being stupid enough to come out here and bother him, maybe even to get his sword out because Tommy has to be running for *some* reason, before he can do *anything*, in a split second between words, there's an arrow through the boy's neck, silencing him, Tommy's pale eyes wide, not in surprise, but desperation. He collapses in the snow only a few metres away.

He's not dead yet. Techno watches him, this terrible choking noise as red bubbles around the arrow wound, Tommy is drowning in his own blood. And he's *still* crawling forward, desperately clawing through the snow, reaching for him. Technoblade, for once in his life, is stunned. He can see tears freezing to Tommy's cheek as blood continues heavily. Techno feels like he isn't moving, like he's watching this scene from a distance, unable to piece together what just happened, but he kneels down and takes Tommy's bloody hand, still reaching out for him with desperate, fumbling fingers. His hand is so small and so cold and it is covered in blood from more than his throat, but Techno takes his hand and holds on. It's all he can do.

He's still trying to talk— Techno realizes with revulsion, and something more like pity— Tommy is still trying to get pleading words out with an arrow through his throat, Tommy's struggling, that terrible, sickening choking noise, too choked to even be a whimper, is the only thing cutting through the thick silence of the snow.

"It's okay," Techno's voice, hoarse and soft, doesn't sound like his own, but he can only hold onto Tommy's hand, to offer something kind to a kid already dead. Techno, if he had thought Tommy had any chance, would've gotten a health potion, a golden apple, *anything*. Technoblade has seen too many young soldiers die to not know better. It's only a matter of time. "It's almost over. It'll stop hurting soon."

Tommy somehow looks even more pained by his words and Technoblade is considering ending it himself, but Tommy's not struggling anymore. His eyes are still open, glassy.

Techno is still holding onto his hand.

Technoblade barely noticed Dream walking towards him, slow and leisurely, following Tommy's bloody trail through the snow. Dream still has a crossbow at his side.

Dream's words cut through the silence left by Tommy going still, calm and without remorse or feeling, it feels like a disruption to everything Techno has witnessed. "Hey, Technoblade. Sorry about this," he says it like he merely inconvenienced him. Like this is a matter of annoyance and not horror. Techno stands up slowly, letting go of Tommy's hand, his own remaining sticky with the kid's blood. He stares down at the body and resists the urge to go for his sword. Tommy is so small, the pool of blood surrounding him doesn't feel like it should be his. Techno's line of sight, swallowed in a spiral of loss unbecoming, is cut off by Dream taking him.

Dream picks Tommy out of the snow like a piece of fallen game on a hunt. He doesn't leave, first he stares at Techno curiously.

“What, Techno? I didn’t think you cared about him, don’t look so shell shocked. He knew the consequences if he tried to leave exile. It’s just a shame it had to end this way,” Dream sighs, adjusting his hold on Tommy’s corpse, hanging so limply over his shoulder. “I’ll take this out of here. Don’t want to lower the property value.”

Technoblade hasn’t said a word, too stunned to even jest at Dream’s concern over property value despite not having a home of his own.

Dream tilts his head, eerie and expressionless behind that mask. “You’re not... *mad* at me for killing him, right? I mean, you *saw* what he was doing. He wasn’t supposed to go near anywhere that’s been touched and your house definitely counts. Still, sorry about this. He never should’ve made it this far. He runs pretty fast for a weakling.”

Technoblade seems to come to some understanding, staring at the trail of blood across the snow instead of the body over Dream’s shoulder. His voice is calm and lighthearted and feels disconnected from everything roiling in the back of his head. Thousands of voices shut away for now. “Nah, don’t worry about it, Dream. You can’t be surprised that this kinda threw me off for a second there,” a gruff laugh. It doesn’t matter if Dream can see that he’s masking his horror. As long as Dream doesn’t perceive him as a threat.

Technoblade is not afraid of Dream. He never has been, he never will be. So he asks, glancing up from the blood to stare into that mask. “He was... tryin’ to say something to me.”

“What’s that?”

“He was trying to speak, Dream. You shot him in the neck, and he was still trying to tell me something. Is there a reason for that?” Technoblade asks coolly. He knows every word raises the potential for a fight, but it’s a suspicious thing, worth questioning.

“I have no idea. I mean, it was a lucky shot,” Dream is calm in reply, unassuming if not for the corpse on his back. “If you’re worried it was something about *you*, I can all but guarantee it wasn’t. Tommy coming here at all was a mistake on his part. Obviously. And I...” Dream trails off, assessing him for a moment. “It’s my philosophy that you won’t find trouble if you don’t go looking for it. And... Tommy went looking.”

Technoblade nods, speaking slowly, carefully. He knows a warning when he sees one. “That’s a... pretty sound philosophy, Dream.”

“Right. I’m glad you can understand that,” Dream gives him an approving nod. “Well, take care, Technoblade.”

Dream turns to leave, Tommy’s corpse hanging over his shoulder, broken and wrong. Dream leaves and Tommy’s dead eyes watch Technoblade like an accusation the whole time; *why didn’t you stop him? Why did you let him kill me, Technoblade?*

Technoblade has nowhere to go from here, he just stares at the figure disappearing into the trees. He can only bear this as witness, because nothing can be done to save a dead kid.

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“Hey, Tommy.”

“Hey, Wil...”

“I’m guessing you didn’t make it away from him?”

Tommy scrunches up his face, a sob rising in his throat, pressing his palms into his eyes as the harsh light of the train station blinds him. At least he’s not in the void. At least he found Wil again.

Why doesn’t that consolation feel like enough?

“Shit, Tommy,” Wilbur seems at a loss for what to say, sitting on the cracked tile beside him. “I mean, you’re here? You’re not– You’re not there anymore?” Wilbur tries weakly.

“H-He’s gonna take me back...” Tommy croaks out tearfully, a hand going to his throat. It feels like there’s still something of it there, like a brand on his neck.

Wilbur can offer no comfort. He had hoped Tommy would be able to run.

“Did you try to get to Technoblade?” Wilbur asks dully. Months of time together, it had come up. How Tommy would get away if Dream revived him again.

“I made it,” Tommy says hoarsely, staring up at the cracked ceiling. “I- I could *see* him, Wil. I tried to tell him, I *tried*, I– I was gonna say– ‘he’s gonna kill me and bring me back! No matter what don’t stop looking for me! Tell Tubbo!’ I dunno, I was gonna say *something*, b-but before I could, Dream–” Tommy inhales shakily, the harsh artificial lights blurred by tears. “He shot me right here,” Tommy’s hand goes to his throat. “S-So I couldn’t speak. I *tried*, Wil. I still tried to get the words out and I t-think Techno wanted to help me, he just didn’t realize...” Tommy reaches out a hand, like he’s reaching for a ghost. Technoblade had held onto him until the end.

“Well, if he cares, maybe he’ll tell someone! Or- Or him and Phil could come and save you!” Wilbur tried again.

“Wil,” Tommy grows sharp and bitter. “No one is gonna try and save someone who’s dead. Why the fuck would they?”

Wilbur had no reply.

Tommy knows Dream will take him back. It’s a matter of waiting now. Being dead didn’t hurt anymore, not like it did before, but the thought that he would soon be ripped away? That *aches*.

“H-He’s gonna hurt me,” Tommy whispers it, like if he speaks any louder it will become more true. “When he takes me back, he’s gonna punish me for trying to run, and I have nothing left– *there’s nothing left for him to take from me so what the fuck is he gonna do to*



*me?!'*" The words come out in a rambling wave, helplessly terrified, he's curled in on himself, rocking back on the platform, anything to soothe his racing heart.

Wilbur runs a hand through his hair, and there's a light behind his eyes, a familiar old fire. "Fuck— I want to tear him to pieces, Tommy. I-If I could— I'm gonna— I'm gonna *disembowel* him, that's it."

It doesn't offer comfort, but at least Tommy laughs.

"Thanks for that, Wil."

Time passes. Eventually Wilbur reaches out a hand. Tommy is still shaken up, so Wilbur doesn't try and hug him, but Tommy takes his hand and holds on tight. He'll do so for as long as he can manage.

"You look like that because of him, don't you?" Wilbur says every word carefully, like he's trying not to sound angry.

"Wot?" Tommy frowns.

"You look..." Wilbur searches his expression, trying to gauge how blunt he should be. "You don't look just dead from the bolt, Tommy. Same with before, it wasn't just from whatever killed you. You look... You look like you were dying already." A pause, Tommy with no reply. "I know things were rough in Pogtopia, but we had enough food, Techno's farm, you... you didn't lose weight that bad there."

"You did."

Wilbur exhales a dry laugh, "yeah, I did. But that was more... I was neglectful, not taking care of myself."

"I know. I had to take care of you instead," Tommy can't help but be cold. It's Wilbur's fault for bringing up Pogtopia. "Maybe I got fucking *neglectful* in exile. Wasn't like there was much point taking care of myself, even when he let me."

"Oh." Wilbur always had something to say. Not now.

"It wasn't like it was with you, Wil. No one tried to take care of me. So when I did what you did, when I jumped—" Tommy doesn't want to be cruel, not to the only person he has left. He can't help it. "It was because no one tried to save me. What's your excuse?"

Wilbur doesn't get angry. All this time alone, he hasn't outgrown his anger, plenty of days wasted, pacing and ranting at the living world, but he doesn't get angry with Tommy. Not for this. "Don't have one, I suppose."

"Yeah," Tommy scoffs.

"It was supposed to be clean, Tommy. A clean break. I destroyed L'Manberg, so you could let go of it, and me."

Tommy sits up, but he doesn't let go of Wilbur's hand. "The fuck do you mean, Wil?"

Wilbur almost seems apologetic, for the harm caused, maybe, but not remorseful for the plans themselves. "You'd hate me, you'd have no reason left to stay there, you'd move on."

Tommy laughs weakly. "*Move on?* Fucking hell, Wil. *Move on?* You'd really gone 'round the bend in the end, didn't you? *Move on...* Who were you kidding? Nah. Only way I left L'Manberg was when I was taken. L'Manberg wasn't just *you*. It wasn't just *for you*, it was all of us. That was gonna outlive you either way."

Wilbur didn't seem to know what to do with that. "I am sorry, Tommy. All this time away... I know I did some harm. I can't say I would take it all back, but some things..." He trails off, regret turning to rage behind brown eyes. "I wish I could be there now. Just to stop him. Then I'd go back to being dead, I could handle that." He glances to Tommy. "That stupid fucking ghost could barely see it. He sort of..." Wilbur gestures vaguely in the air, "fuzzed it all to some *vacation* for you. But the glimpses," Wilbur shut his eyes, like he's trying to remember a dream. "You looked so *tired*, Tommy. The moment I started seeing you *here*, terrified and hurt, I knew for sure, but even before. He fucking took you from your home, he humiliated you, mocked you. After everything—you fucking lost to him, you challenged him when you were still just a kid, and he killed you, and you *still* beat him, Tommy! You negotiated for our freedom, you're a fucking *soldier*, and he treats you like you're nothing. No fucking respect. After I trusted him."

"Did you trust him?" Tommy scoffs quietly, it's the only thing he can respond to in all of that.

Wilbur pauses for a moment. "No, I suppose I didn't. He was useful. That was all."

"I'm pretty sure he thought the same of you."

"Yeah, I get that better now. My heads clearer."

Tommy laughs dryly. "Yeah, only took being dead to get you to that bit. Wish you'd figured it out a bit sooner."

"Wouldn't have changed anything."

Tommy goes quiet for a moment, searching Wilbur's expression, but he just stares out at the empty tracks. "What would've changed it?" He asks it softly, not sure if he wants an answer. If there *is* an answer, that means Tommy failed in some way. He was supposed to save his brother and he didn't. If there isn't...

He doesn't want the worst day of his life to have been inevitable.

Wilbur opens his mouth to reply, but before he can speak, Tommy hears another voice.

"*Wake up.*"

3/4 SBI :D

As always, your thoughts are cherished, I had so much fun reading the comments on the last chapter. Sorry for the heartache but also not sorry at all <3

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

This chapter has got it all! We've got blood, we've got sickness, we've got dehydration, we've got claustrophobia!  
Read with appropriate levels of caution y'know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Technoblade knows New L'Manberg is probably the last place he should plan on visiting, but Phil lived there, and apparently Technoblade and his wanted posters were not the top priority of the L'Manbergian cabinet. Still, when Techno arrived to see the entirety of the new government talking in hushed tones by the podium, he did consider jumping off the platform into the water.

“Hey! Techno!” Phil greeting him stopped him.

“Hey, Phil. What’s the little regime up to now?” Techno drawled, following Phil into his home.

Philza glanced back to the gathering on the podium, lingering on Tubbo who remains quiet, nodding on occasion as Quackity speaks adamantly. The kid had looked tired since the start of his term, but now there’s this bone deep *weariness* Phil fears might never go away. Phil knows better than most the pain of outliving someone you love.

“Probably not much, things uh, things have been a bit grim around here as of late,” Phil sighs, shutting his door against the grief stricken atmosphere outside before going to a chest in search of his tools.

“Oh,” Techno continues to watch the gathering through the window, his disapproving frown exchanged for a wince. “Tubbo found out about Tommy, did he? That’s rough.”

“Yeah, how’d you hear about it way out there?” Philza looks at him curiously.

“Saw it.”

“You *saw* it?” Phil is shocked, stopping in his current task and turning back to face his old friend with a shiver. “Jesus, mate, that’s horrifying. I’m guessing... there was nothing you could do?”

Technoblade shakes his head, still staring at Tubbo through the glass. He looks miserable and exhausted. Techno isn’t very inclined to pity the government, but losing a best friend so young, Techno can be harsh but he knows an injustice when he sees one. “Happened too fast.

I stayed with him, though. He was still alive for a second there, so I stayed until Dream came and picked him up.”

Phil nods. He had heard that Dream had found Tommy and taken him to New L’Manberg, but he hadn’t mentioned Technoblade. “Shit consolation, but good to hear he wasn’t alone in the end.”

Techno hums a noncommittal reply before turning away from the window. “Not really feelin’ like going over there to all those people to give my condolences or whatever, let’s get out of here,” Techno gave him a nod.

“Fair enough, but you might want to consider telling him you were there,” Phil pushes gently, nothing accusing in his tone.

“Why would I do that? Kid’s probably messed up enough over it as is. He doesn’t need to hear another horror story,” Technoblade grimaces.

“Like I said. Might be nice for Tubbo to know he wasn’t alone,” Phil shrugs, hands raised in defeat. “Just my thoughts. I know you’re not very social at the best of times.”

“Maybe. Not now, but maybe,” Techno paces by the door. “You ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get all fussy,” Phil rolls his eyes, pickaxes now stowed in his belt.

They make it as far as the prime path when Technoblade sees him. A man in a white mask heading in the direction of the white mansion by the sea. Techno can’t see Dream’s eyes, but he knows they’re staring right back at him, a challenge. Techno doesn’t acknowledge him. He keeps walking.

Technoblade doesn’t understand Tubbo, for reasons beyond government and control. He doesn’t know how Tubbo can let the man who killed his best friend walk. Technoblade expected more from an original L’Manbergian, even powerless, they had always believed in loyalty. Then again, Tubbo had exiled him. Maybe that’s enough to dismiss his murderer too. Technoblade doesn’t bring it up, he has no intention of spending the day with Phil talking about dead kids and old rivals.

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Dream isn’t scared of Technoblade, but he *is* a threat. When he passes him on the prime path, days after witnessing Tommy’s murder, he expects a remark. Technoblade and Philza just keep walking. Good, but something he needs to keep an eye on.

That is not his goal today. He’s checking in on his other pet project.

Sam is outside of the mass of blackstone and obsidian now cutting through the horizon when Dream arrives.

“Hey, Sam! How’re things coming along?” Dream greets him cheerfully.

“Oh! Christ, Dream, you scared me,” Sam clutches his heart, and Dream thinks for a moment he sees smoke curling out of his mouth. Sam laughs nervously, pressing on. “Good! It’s going really good. At this point, it’s just some fine tuning. There’s a *lot* of redstone to check.”

“I bet,” Dream leans against Sam’s many chests of supplies, admiring his commission. “It’s beautiful.”

“What?” Sam glances back to the prison. “Yeah, in a way. I was hoping more for *imposing*, with the lava and everything, but if you like it, that’s all that matters.” Sam had changed since taking this project. First planning with passion and naivete, then he began to question why Dream needed a prison in the first place. He had tried to change some things, he’d build a courtyard. None of it lasted. Working with a man like Dream for all this time, Sam learned not to ask questions.

“How’s—” Sam cuts himself off, a useless question dying in his chest. *How’s Tommy?*

Dream notices his pause, putting a hand on his old friend’s shoulder. “I know, Sam. Feels like I only just saw him. Tommy shouldn’t have gone out that way. Some people just break easier than others. It’s no one’s fault, just a shame it happened at all.”

Sam nods, unsure of Dream’s notions of *breaking*, but accepting Dream’s sympathies either way. “Yeah. He was a good kid.”

Dream doesn’t reply to that.

Sam sighs, leaning back against the chests beside him. “You know, I tried to give him a place to stay during exile.”

Dream looks over at him sharply, right hand curled into a fist against the wooden chest.

“Whoa,” Sam raises an eyebrow at him. “He didn’t accept, obviously. Not like it matters now. Statute of limitations has passed. Don’t get mad at me for trying to look out for a dead kid.”

“Right, right...” Dream relaxes, but it looks almost forced. “When...” Dream clears his throat, trying to revoke some of the tension in his voice. “When did you ask him? To stay or whatever.”

“Really early on,” Sam has no reason not to tell him. As he said, it surely didn’t matter now. “Early enough he was way too proud to accept help. Don’t know how you got him to trust you enough to let you keep visiting.”

Dream laughs softly at this. “We’ll just say very very carefully.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you did your best,” Sam misunderstands, he tries to console him.

“Sometimes you just don’t really know what’s going on in someone’s head, you know?”

“Definitely.”

“And, I mean, poor Tubbo, man,” Sam winces. “That kid has been through enough as is. He’s seemed lonely for a while now, and now people don’t seem to wanna leave him alone. Just sucks that it took someone he loves dying to get people to check up on him.”

“Speaking of,” Dream stands. “I made a promise to somebody I was gonna check in on Tubbo. So, I gotta do that.”

“Right, I’ll keep working. I’ll see you later, Dream. Tell Tubbo I said hi. And that I’m thinking of him.”

“Will do, Sam,” Dream gives him a nod before making his way back to the prime path, looking over his shoulder at the prison one more time. Sam said it was almost ready, but Dream knows that isn’t true. Dream hasn’t made his Warden yet. He’s paid Sam well, not well enough that Dream thinks he’ll keep his mouth shut about all of this. Not without some more... forceful incentive. Dream knows it will be difficult to find Fran, but until then, it’s not like Tommy is going anywhere.

Tubbo is with Quackity, Fundy, Ranboo, and Ghostbur when Dream arrives. They all behave as if a teacher has walked into the room when they spot him.

“Hello, Dream,” Quackity greets him with a placating smile, everything behind his eyes calculating. “What can we do for you?”

“Me? Nothing,” Dream nods courteously. “Just wanted to check in. See how we were all holding up.”

“How do you think, man?” Fundy is abrasive as ever.

“We’re holding up just fine, Dream! Why wouldn’t we be?” Ghostbur is the most cheerful of the lot, drifting around him aimlessly.

Dream looks back to the rest of the group, each wearing a grimace, except for Ranboo, who wears a sadness that only comes from understanding, maybe even fear, of seeing himself in a dead man.

Dream is curious. So he pushes on like he hadn’t just read the sourness of grief on all of their faces. “Well, after Tommy, I thought you might want some company.”

“Oh, yeah! We all miss Tommy here, how is he?” Ghostbur asks brightly.

Dream looks back to the assembled group. Tubbo is staring him down, his eyes not holding a request, but an expectation that he lies, a threat if Dream does otherwise. Dream finds it amusing, that Tubbo thinks that he can do *anything* to him. There are no consequences this pathetic little follower could give him, but he’ll play along. So long as the game stays fun.

“Right, Ghostbur, he’s uh,” Dream mulls it over. “Tired,” a smile twitches behind the mask. “He’s got a sore throat. Couldn’t talk much yesterday.”

“Aw, that’s too bad! Maybe I’ll bring him some blue! I could bring him honey too!” With a new goal in mind, Ghostbur drifts up the hill towards his sewer.

“You didn’t have to elaborate like that,” Quackity frowns, disapproval evident.

“Well, I assumed you all didn’t want Ghostbur to know. I thought that was pretty convincing,” Dream is haughty, despite his best efforts to masquerade benevolence.

“It’s not that we *don’t* want him to know,” Ranboo speaks up, voice low and grumbling.  
“We’ve told him three times, actually...”

“Yeah, doesn’t *stick*,” Fundy’s jaw tenses, his dead father’s naivete is especially grating to him.

“Huh. Well, guess you all tried your best,” Dream sounds oh so sympathetic.

“Crying burns him. We’re not going to make him cry more,” Tubbo says, voice so calm and unfeeling. He glances to Ranboo, almost subconsciously. Dream takes note of that. It feels like a vulnerability. Useful. “Ghostbur can’t cope with his feelings on a good day, so.” Tubbo doesn’t stop, anger rising. “You try telling him his brother died. See how you manage when he starts asking about when his fucking ghost is coming home and where the compass is to see if he can find him—” Tubbo cuts himself off, taking a deep breath, his feelings are once again placed behind a wall. “It’s better this way,” he ends more calmly.

“What about the compass?” Dream asks.

“You know, the one he made me, so I could see where Tommy is,” Tubbo explains. He takes a shaky breath, trying to steady himself, to stay strong like always. “It... It stopped working. Went to his grave the other day and... it’s not glowing anymore. It’s like the enchantment just turned off.”

“I’m sorry, Tubbo. I mean, I don’t know what you expected to happen, but I’m sure it still hurts,” Dream seems to think he’s being kind instead of patronizing. As a matter of diplomacy, none of the L’Manberg cabinet point it out. “Well, I should get going. Just wanted to check in, see how you all were holding up.” Dream puts a hand on Tubbo’s shoulder, Tubbo pulls away for a moment, before forcing himself to stop. *Diplomacy*. “If you need anything, just reach out. I tried to look after Tommy, least I can do is look after his best friend.”

Dream wears a mask for a reason. He’s glad they can’t see his satisfaction when Tubbo looks weakened by his words. All it took was the title *best friend*, and Tubbo’s stoicism wilts. Throughout this day, Dream has seen his reckoning, every calculation, every move, Technoblade, Sam, Tubbo, L’Manberg, Tommy, every single piece had fallen into the right place. Tubbo had let Dream put a hand on his shoulder, old enemies, discomfort sharp in grief, and Tubbo chose to avoid disrespect rather than his own ease. *Perfect*.

“Thanks, Dream. We’ve got, you know, country stuff to do,” Quackity wanted Dream gone. Dream is kind enough to oblige.

He has more important matters to attend to.

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“He still gives me the fucking creeps,” Quackity mutters as Dream leaves their borders. “He kept his armor on. No respect.”

“He brought Tommy back to us,” Tubbo watches Dream leave as well. He doesn’t have it in him to feel angry anymore.

“He’s also the guy who took him away,” Fundy pointed out, arms folded over his chest.

None of them mention Tubbo being the one to give the order to exile him. That particular detail would die with Tommy. Tubbo had suffered for his choice enough.

“Now that *he’s* gone, though,” Quackity shifts his weight from foot to foot, impatient to resume their original course of conversation. “Tubbo, I know now isn’t the best time, and don’t take this as me like, pressuring you or expecting us to act now, but we had it all figured out. Technoblade was going down, and then...” he stops himself.

“Then Tommy killed himself,” Tubbo says the words with perhaps too much calm. They’d been talking in circles for hours now. “I know you’re scared, Quackity—”

Quackity bristles, “I’m *not*—”

“Fine, you’re not,” Tubbo looks so much older. He’s been weary and battleworn for a long time now, but there’s something else there. It’s like a light has gone out. “Then even less reason to pursue this right now. I am not going to run off on a revenge plot for the sake of anyone’s ego. We’ve lost enough.”

“You say that like we don’t even have a chance—” Fundy cuts in, offended.

“My word on this is final!” Tubbo snaps, getting to his feet. “If you all want to run off and distract yourselves with finding another person to hurt, go ahead! But you *won’t* be fucking doing it with my help, under *my* country’s flag!”

Before any retort can be made, Tubbo is already making his way down the prime path away from them.

“Shit, I didn’t think Tubbo would...” Fundy winces. He looks to Quackity for instruction. “So, not Technoblade. What about—?”

“Dream?” Quackity huffs. “Yeah, that’d be nice. You heard Tubbo.” Quackity frowns, lost in thought. “I still fucking hate the guy, but if he really was the last person who was there for Tommy...”

“You’re not gonna say we should just let him go,” Fundy scoffs.

“Nah, not that, but...” Quackity frowns, staring across the horizon in the direction of Tommy’s house and his grave. “Give him some time too. Finding a kid’s dead body...”

“I don’t think...” Ranboo trails off, staring after where Tubbo had disappeared.

“What, Ranboo?” Quackity looks like he’s hoping Ranboo will contradict him, that he’ll maybe even throw some support towards going after Technoblade.

“I don’t think Dream was looking out for Tommy out there,” he says it quietly, a serious frown. He stares at the ground instead of at them.

“He was more than we were,” Quackity sighs. “As much as I hate to admit it. We wouldn’t have known anything going on with Tommy if Dream hadn’t told us shit.”

“Well maybe he didn’t tell us everything...”

“Ranboo, dude. If you know something just say it,” Fundy gives him a look.

“I don’t know anything, really, but Dream said...” Ranboo pauses, doubting himself.

“Try us,” Fundy nudges him.

“Dream said he thought Tommy was just a *little* sad. Maybe it’s all just... perspective, I dunno, but when I last saw Tommy he was miserable.”

Quackity leans in, trepidation rising. “Enough that you thought he might..?”

“No, not this. Definitely not this, but...” Ranboo doesn’t know any of this for sure. His memories of it are foggy at best, most of his letters from Tommy he’s seemingly lost, but he still has this feeling that there’s something wrong. More wrong than a dead friend. Ranboo doesn’t continue.

Quackity sighs. “Maybe Tubbo is right. We don’t know enough and... we need to be united if we’re going to do anything. So, we leave Technoblade and Dream to it. At least for now,” Quackity has no intention of sitting in his grief, but he knows when to pull back and wait. He cannot take on Technoblade alone, and without Tubbo, he’ll lose Ranboo, and Fundy was never exactly the bravest or the strongest fighter.

“That’s awfully nice for you, Quackity,” Fundy raises an eyebrow.

Quackity doesn’t look amused. “People die, that changes things.”

Fundy looks towards the sewers over the hill. “Yeah. It does, doesn’t it?”

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“*Wake up.*”

Tommy coughs blood immediately, it still thick and coagulated in his throat, keeping air from his lungs. He’s somewhere unfamiliar. Everything hurts. That *is* familiar.

Tommy gags over the obsidian, spitting thick, old blood that smells of rot. He’s finally able to take wheezing breaths. He lays back on the floor, the obsidian is rugged and sharp on his back. He shouldn’t be this tired after being dead.

“Rude awakening?” Dream’s voice, amused and cool, gets him to sit back up sharply.

Dream is standing in the doorway of the room. Tommy tries to take in his surroundings, but his focus stays on Dream in case he comes closer. The room is dark, the walls a layer of obsidian except for the gap where Dream now stands, towering and blocking the only light behind him. Tommy can see stone steps going up. That’s all.

Tommy moves to speak, an accusation heavy in his chest. *Where the fuck am I?!*

Tommy gasps, grabbing his throat as his efforts only result in pain and him gagging on more blood. Dream tilts his head, curious, crouching down beside him. The room is small, three blocks squared. Tommy tries to lean away anyways.

“Say something.”

Tommy chokes on the words *fuck you*, his throat protesting agonizingly.

“Huh,” Dream laughs. “Finally figured out a way to get you to shut up.” He stands, satisfied. “You look *scared*,” Dream teases him. “I mean, you were scared before, but this is *different*, right? Your ability to be annoying was the only thing you had left. Who knows. You might not get it back.”

Tommy hates that his fear is so apparent on his face, but Dream is right. Tommy has lost enough, he can’t lose his voice too. He isn’t even able to beg Dream for help, for information, for *anything*. Tommy doesn’t know where he is. He doesn’t know what Dream has planned next. He can still see Technoblade’s stunned face, he can see Wilbur’s exhausted worry. Now there’s only that eerie smile. Tommy wants to say *what the fuck are you gonna do to me? Quit stalling and get it over with you fucking coward*. Even with his voice, Tommy doesn’t think he’d be brave enough for that.

“Maybe I’ll fix you later. If it’s permanent, hey, look on the bright side, I never have to hear your fucking whining again. That just might keep you out of trouble. And you’re not so stupid you’re illiterate, right? If I have questions you’ll write answers.”

Tommy feels bitter rage rise up. It’s almost a comfort. If he can feel anything towards Dream besides fear, it means he’s still him. To some extent anyway. Not enough that Tommy has the guts to try and punch Dream in his stupid fucking face.

“Sorry, that was mean,” Dream says it like a joke. “I’ll try and be fairer to you. That stunt you pulled,” Dream shakes his head and Tommy presses himself further into the wall. “Have to say I’m impressed. I mean, using the *coals*, running when there was enough smoke that I couldn’t see you. You actually had me chasing you, and you got *close*, didn’t you? Enough to make me nervous. When I heard you shouting and I shot that bolt,” he laughs. Dream knows every word is another knife in Tommy’s chest. That’s why he doesn’t stop. “That was a *close one*. Another second, I think Technoblade might’ve even protected you!”

Tommy can’t hold back a whimper, even as it hurts. He doesn’t want to think about how much it would hurt to cry with his voice like this, god forbid scream, and knowing Dream that is more than a possibility.

Dream pauses for a moment, expression unreadable. Tommy can only wait with dread.

“I am impressed. That wasn’t a lie, Tommy,” Dream shifts from mocking and jovial to a tone low and threatening in an instant. “I am going to have to punish you, though.”

Tommy feels his heart racing, knocking against the inside of his chest, it can’t escape either. Tommy curls his hands into fists, nails dragging across the obsidian. He *needs* to get out of here. This is not a dawning realization, this room had incited fear from the beginning, but Tommy is suddenly hyper aware of how *small* it is, how the walls close in and circle tighter and Dream is framing the only way out.

“Don’t *worry*, I won’t kill you. I’ll just make you wish I did,” Dream is back to that lively tone, tilting back on his heels. “Dying of thirst... hm, I’m guessing that isn’t exactly pleasant. So. You’re gonna stay here, okay? Alone,” Dream leans down again so they’re face to face. “And you know what *I’m* gonna do? I’m gonna go see Tubbo. Your old best friend,” Dream is grinning behind that mask. Tommy knows it. “Y’know he’s pretty broken up about you. You killed yourself and it’s his fault. That was good. It wasn’t even a lie. *You* did all that for me, so thanks for that. And now *no one* is going to go looking for you. If they want to see you, they have a grave to visit. Isn’t that nice? You got a *grave*, Tommy! More than Wilbur did, funny since you both went out the same way. I’ll see you in a week or so, okay?” He moves to leave, before reconsidering. Tommy refuses to look at him, staring at the obsidian floor. It already has his blood on it. Dream puts a hand under his chin, forcing him to look back up at that soulless, white mask. “You know, I could leave you here forever,” he’s not even spiteful, it’s merely a statement of fact without feeling or threat. That’s worse. “I could leave you here until you... starved to death, died of thirst more likely. Come back, revive you, and leave again. Your existence could be *this* forever. I want you to think on that. On your behavior, until I come back. *If* I come back.”

Now Dream leaves. Tommy watches him go and imagines ripping that mask off and shoving it through his neck, see how he likes it.

His anger dies the moment Dream places down the obsidian.

Another feeble whine escapes painfully as he staggers to his feet, rushing to the smooth wall of obsidian now encasing him. Tommy feels along for an edge, but there is nothing, save for a thin sliver between the stone, maybe wide enough Tommy could claw at the light now fading through it, not enough to comprehend escape, only be taunted by the reminder that the world exists outside of this place. It’s almost like limbo again, but this time Wilbur is never going to appear out of the dark to save him.

*I’ve pounded my fists against the walls until they were bloody, and it has done nothing.*

Wilbur’s words return to him, a warning. That doesn’t stop Tommy from trying, even when it hurts, even when more of his blood paints the obsidian walls. The room is too small. It’s *too small*, he paces the length of the room and it’s a few steps until he hits the wall, *everything* presses in tighter it’s like he’s being buried alive. He can’t take it he can’t breathe and there’s no way out and the obsidian cuts into his hands as he claws at the walls, he throws himself against the doorway Dream had sealed over and over even when it hurts enough to bruise, when the impact leaves him curled on the floor, his ribs already ache. His hands are

bloody and his fingernails torn. Just like Wilbur said. He tries to bury sobs, to bury every urge to *scream* and beg for *anyone* to get him out *he needs to get out get out get out get out—*

It takes Tommy days to die.

The silence presses in like a physical weight and he can hear his own heart racing, frantically trying to continue on. He gave up struggling on the second day. Not that he has any notion of days passing. Deeper into his entombment, in one more desperate bid he tried again, he tried to scream and whether pain or fatigue those efforts left him blacked out back on the ground. He's been too dehydrated for tears for days already, if he could even stay conscious long enough to mourn himself anymore. He's been in the dark for so long, he cannot see how much blood covers the walls now.

He just wants to see light again, to have water. *God* what he'd give to have water...

When Tommy dies, at first he doesn't notice. He's awake. That's the most surprising part, that he's conscious again. He's still in pain, that's nothing new, but then he realizes it's no longer the ache of old injuries, or the jagged stone he's laying on, it's the familiar pins and needles of his atoms beginning to pull apart.

Tommy might have felt relief once. He isn't thirsty anymore. At least this pain is familiar. He could find Wilbur again.

He just keeps falling.

Maybe he shouldn't feel claustrophobic anymore, but this endless *nothingness* is still a tomb. He can't pull himself out of it. He doesn't even try because through the blood and the hysteria and the pain all he could think about is that Tubbo knows he killed himself. He's falling and it *hurts* and none of that matters because Tubbo thinks he's dead. That Tommy killed himself and he'll blame himself Tommy *knows* he will. He's abandoned his best friend with that misery, and now no one will look for him. That was it. His last shot. Now everyone thinks he's dead, and from what Dream said, he made sure it was confirmed.

Tommy got a grave. That's more than Wilbur ever got. Tommy doesn't take any consolation from that. It hurts worse to know he was loved enough to be mourned but not enough to be saved.

## Chapter End Notes

I know I'm the one writing him, but I too want to strangle Dream. I want him to be eaten by cats.

Who knows, maybe one day we'll get there

and this probably wasn't obvious but Tommy's conversation with Dream takes place before Dream's visit to New L'Manberg, he's checking in on Tubbo just like he promised :)

Also- Some of this chapter is inspired by Rozugold's protege!Tommy au! I highly recommend checking out their art :D  
(this [post](#) specifically)

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

lots of manipulation in this one! I Hate c!Dream! As well as aftermath of starvation and a hard time eating. And discussion of suicide because Wilbur

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Tommy. Tommy please, I can’t reach you, you’ve got to come to me!”*

Tommy doesn’t reply.

“Can you... can you hear me?” Wilbur tries again, no longer shouting, now under the impression he is once again imprisoned to the role of witness. “It’s gonna be okay, Tommy. I’ll... I’ll find a way to get you here... don’t know how yet...”

Tommy curls into a ball, even as he’s still in free fall. It’s not a descent so fast he can’t think, but he’s still falling out of the world. And it still hurts. He doesn’t want to look at Wilbur. He doesn’t want to *think* about him or feel anything at all. Maybe he’ll be able to drift away and sleep like Schlatt does. Maybe there is some version of the afterlife where this ends.

“Okay, Tommy. I don’t know if you can hear me, and if you can... I don’t know what happened or what Dream did, but you can talk to me.”

Wilbur seems to be really trying. It makes the ache in Tommy’s chest worse. He doesn’t know if he’s grieving or scared or just guilty, it aches either way. Tommy knows if he opens his eyes he’ll see his brother’s worried face in the dark. Maybe that would be a comfort. He doesn’t deserve it. He feels bad ignoring Wilbur after how alone he’d seemed and how desperate to connect with him, but Wilbur got through years of being alone. It’s Tommy’s turn to decay in isolation.

“Fuck– Why can’t I grab your arm?!” Wilbur grows more frustrated. “I’m sorry, Tommy, I’m trying to get you back here, I am.” A weary sigh. “You can’t even hear me, can you? Just like the good old days,” he says sarcastically. “That stupid ghost running around– *useless*. Fucking useless,” a sardonic laugh. “Not like I was any good to you alive, either...”

“Not useless,” Tommy mumbles. It’s strange, he can speak here. His throat doesn’t hurt anymore.

“What?” Wilbur is startled by his ability to reply. “Who, me?”

Tommy opens his eyes, knees tucked into his chest. Wilbur stares at him from the dark, eyebrows raised. “...No, Ghostbur,” he says dryly.

Wilbur tries to mask his fondness with irritation. “Right, you give me the silent treatment for *days* now and you come back to defend poor little Ghostbur.”

“Not like he’s here to defend himself...”

Wilbur looks him over, trying to read his expression for some sign of something having changed. Tommy just looks tired. Wilbur almost wants to just keep talking about nonsense, complaining about Ghostbur, but these past days had scared him. He thought he might never get Tommy back. That maybe something had happened in the living world that finally made Tommy give up on him. It’s selfish, if anyone needs someone not to give up on them right now it’s Tommy. So Wilbur has to ask, even if it scares him.

“What happened, Tommy?” His voice grows soft and Tommy seems to flinch away from the somber change in mood. “Why were you—” Wilbur cuts himself off. He doesn’t want to ask. “What did... What did Dream do? What’s been happening to you?”

Tommy shivers, looking like he’s planning on never speaking again.

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me, I wasn’t trying to push or whatever, it just... You scared me, man. Like, *bad* scared me. You’re never this kind of quiet,” Wilbur hopes he sounds more gentle than serious.

Tommy shrugs.

Wilbur sighs. “Right, well, since you’re at least *reacting* now, do you want to try and come back to the platform with me?” Wilbur reaches out a hand.

Tommy hesitates for a moment before reciprocating.

They can’t touch.

It’s this strange distortion where it’s like their hands pass *by* each other, never quite lined up to meet. Somehow Tommy isn’t surprised. He’s just weary, as his very atoms tug away from each other and then back together over and over.

Wilbur doesn’t seem to take this development quite as well. “What-? Why isn’t it working?! You could do it last time, but for some reason I can’t,” Wilbur tries again, trying to put a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. Nothing. He frowns, pacing in what just looks like a black void to Tommy. “It has to be you, I think. I can’t pull you out of it. But why did it *stop* for you? It worked before!”

Tommy offers no reply. He’s tired in soul and body, if whatever he is now has a body. His bones ache and his head pounds. Being dead shouldn’t feel so diseased. He’d rather feel nothing. Which, technically, he does. All of this pain is internal, there’s nothing outside of himself to respond *to*, no one is hitting him and the air here isn’t cold, there isn’t biting ocean wind or sharp rocks underneath him. He hurts regardless.

Maybe this is a fair fate. Tubbo is forced to bear the burden of Tommy abandoning him, and Tommy will keep falling.



*He abandoned you first.*

Tommy wishes he were too dead to feel resentment.

“Tommy? Are you not listening? Or can you not hear me? I can’t fucking tell, man, are you ignoring me or not?” Wilbur grumbles, still pacing.

“Doesn’t matter, Wil,” Tommy mumbles.

“Doesn’t *matter*?” Wilbur turns sharply to face him. “Are you fucking kidding, Tommy? I remember right, and I do, you said it felt like being *torn apart*.”

“...Not too bad. It’s just like... being covered in pins and needles. Like your skin is getting pulled on and shit,” Tommy says like this offers any consolation.

Wilbur’s irritation wanes into concern. “...*Tommy*. Please don’t... don’t do that.”

“What? Fall apart? Let myself get hurt? Fucking hurt myself?” Tommy turns sharp and accusing. “Why not, I learned from the *fucking best*, right, Wil?”

Wilbur is for the moment, silenced by this. Tommy gets some satisfaction that Wilbur has no retort, that he looks stunned and hurt. It turns to guilt just as fast. He doesn’t want it.

“I... I know I want to defend myself to you,” Wilbur laughs, helpless and almost panicked. “I know I want to tell you that it’s *different*, for you, Tommy. It’s different because you didn’t hurt anyone, not like I did at least, right?” Wilbur’s smile, forced and almost furious, turns to exhaustion. He looks like he’s trying not to mourn, himself or Tommy, it didn’t matter. “I know you’ll rebuke me for saying that, but I believe it. It’s... It’s different with you, Tommy. Of course it is. I... I can’t do that to you. Not again.” Wilbur waits for a reaction, a response, something. Tommy just stares at him through dull grey eyes. Wilbur sighs, turning to resume his pacing. “Just being a self pitying asshole... of course you don’t want to here me whining about being worthless... no better than talking about myself like I’m a god, it’s a dick move either way...”

“I dunno if I’m gonna *rebuke* you, or whatever,” Tommy finally speaks. “You fucked yourself up plenty before you died. And I’m pissed off about that almost as much as I am for you killing yourself. But... I can’t be a bitch about you trying to help me. Because all I fucking *did* was try to help you.” He’s angry at Wilbur. He doesn’t want to be angry. Wilbur is the only face he’s seen in months, years if he really considers how long he’s spent in this void. It’s hard not to be. So much time spent missing Wilbur, thinking none of this would’ve gotten this bad if he’d still had him, like most of it isn’t an outcome of Wilbur’s own actions, as if Wilbur isn’t the one who fucking *left* him in this. He can’t let go of that. These months seeing a dead Wil again don’t cancel out the months recovering from his ashes.

Wilbur nods. He understands. “Do you want me to help you, Tommy?” Wilbur is not quite defeated, but if Tommy tells him to give up, he will. He owes him that.

Tommy considers him for a moment, something more cautious behind his eyes. “...did you want *me* to stop trying to help you? Back in Pogtopia?” He waits. Wilbur doesn’t reply, he

just stares back, weary. “You wanted me to stop... to stop telling you to stop? With the... with the TNT and the rambling all fuckin’ night... you didn’t *sleep*, did you, Wil? I’d tell you to give it a rest, to just go to bed, so *I* could fucking sleep without your fuckin’ frantic, batshit voice in my ear, and you’d go to bed and... did you even sleep then? Or did you just lay there until I fell asleep? During the day I thought you slept, until I fuckin’ realized every time I went past you, you had your eyes open. I’d be running around for hours, trying to get us armor and weapons and food, looking out at Manberg, waiting for Tubbo to report back, and I’d come back to Pogtopia and you’d still be in bed staring at the... staring at the fucking wall.” Tommy watches him. He hasn’t seen another person’s face in so long, but he tries to read him, every furrowed brow and the way his eyes always have something lurking behind them, always looking like he knows something Tommy doesn’t. “Or— Or the potatoes, eh? Remember the potatoes? Technoblade got us set up with food, but you didn’t eat it, did you? Not even when I brought you shit? Half the time I tried to make you, but even then you just did it to make me go away, right?”

Wilbur still says nothing.

Tommy feels bitter vindication. “Right...” He scoffs. “Hey, think about it this way, if I hadn’t fuckin’ taken care of you, you probably wouldn’t have lived to see your *grand finale*, eh?”

“I tried to get you to stop,” Wilbur is quiet, he can’t bring himself to look Tommy in the eye anymore so he stares at the cracked, dirty tile of the platform. He knows every word is worthless, worse it’s unfair, but it’s all he has to give. “Told you to let it go...” He paused. “I didn’t think you noticed it. Not how bad it was. I always tried to...” Wilbur stops himself. Even now, even dead, even hated or maybe bitterly loved, Tommy dead too, and *nothing* left for him to cling to, not pride or fear or delusion, even now he can’t say it, *I tried to hide it. I only cried when you were asleep, or when you weren’t there. You weren’t supposed to hear me, Tommy.* Wilbur can’t help but wonder if Tommy ever heard him crying back in L’Manberg too.

So much time wasted trying to keep the image of a strong leader, and Tommy saw him crumble anyway. There’s more to blame than just Schlatt sending them away for that. It never mattered. None of it did.

“I couldn’t do that.” Tommy almost sounds surprised, like he doesn’t understand how Wilbur could ever doubt that fact. “I was gonna get L’Manberg back, Wil. With or without you.” He says it as condemnation. He’s right to.

Wilbur looks up. Tommy’s eyes look a bit bluer now, just a shade, still grey, but something else there. He looks so *sure*. Beaten down and angry and exhausted, too familiar with suffering and his past laced with betrayal, and despite it all Tommy still believes. Even now he believed he was going to get L’Manberg back. He at least believes that he believed it then. Wilbur hopes so at least. Wilbur was wrong. It did matter. It mattered to Tommy. To all of them. They had literally built over the ashes, stubborn as cockroaches they were. Wilbur thought he had destroyed it for good, he had believed completely that there was no coming back from that, that his creation would die with him, because somehow he had

forgotten the sheer bloody resilience his people had. The very thing that had won them their independence. Wilbur couldn't be prouder.

"You've grown." Wilbur hopes that somehow says enough. It's a strange thing to say, when he's talking about the one thing Tommy had managed to keep the same.

"That's what happens when you keep living."

Wilbur laughs softly like that doesn't hurt. "Yeah. Guess it is."

Silence falls. They drift back into their own heads, back to time passing, hours, days, something even more unknown, before they talk again. Tommy is still angry with Wil, but he's still his only company. He'll talk to him again. Not like he has a choice.

They don't get that chance.

One moment he's staring off into the blackness, hoping his thoughts will turn to nothing, the next he's back on harsh stone, cold and aching and very much alive.

*"Wake up."*

—

"So, you've been dead for two weeks now." Tubbo picks at the grass around the grave, staring at the flowers, fresh and not yet dead, now placed beside the compass. "Feels stupid to act like that's important somehow. You were gone for months before you died too. Not to say *you're* not important," he adds quickly like somehow a headstone can take offense. "But I guess before..." Tubbo sighs, a weight lingering in his chest. "I still convinced myself you were gonna come home someday. Wasn't doing anything to change Dream's mind other than... than being polite and asking if you could have a fucking visitor's pass..."

A pause. No reply to fill the silence.

"This feels weird, you know? Normally it's hard to get you to shut up, now I keep on waiting for you to answer like..." Tubbo stares at the stone. It is unmoving and unfeeling and empty. The words carved into it feel meaningless. *Tommyinnit* is not merely letters cut into stone. Those mere shapes and divots are not his best friend. It's quite literally like talking to a wall.

What else is he suppose to *do*?

"So, Fundy's left. I think he's wanted to for a while now, but he stayed for... well, I think he stayed for me. He left a few days ago, said he was moving to the desert," Tubbo looks around the clearing, trying to keep his eyes from being drawn to the bench on the cliffside. He's alone out here. He's so tired of being alone. "That's another one of us gone, huh?" Tubbo sighs. A bitter realization hits him like a firework to the chest. "Oh." A pause, where Tommy, if he weren't busy rotting six feet under, would ask him what he'd thought of. Tubbo is forced to voice it aloud unprompted. "I'm the last one left. Aren't I?" Tubbo

laughs, painfully like tears. “Fundy and Eret are still breathing, I guess, but... not like it matters. Gone is gone. And I think they’re not coming back any more than you are.”

Tubbo has to move on. If he keeps thinking about this he’s going to lay down next to Tommy and never move again.

“Quackity stayed,” Tubbo stumbles over his words, desperate to change the subject. “He’s— He’s still around. Phil still lives in L’Manberg. And so does Ranboo, so it’s not empty. Not really. It’s just...” He knows Tommy can’t actually hear him. But it feels like confessing to a failure to say aloud, *this isn’t really it, is it? It’s a pale imitation, or something new entirely if we’re being generous, but it’s not L’Manberg. Not as it was.* “With you gone, it’s not ever gonna be like that again,” he says softly.

Only silence in reply.

He’s never going to hear Tommy’s voice again. Not that brash laugh, or that rumble before he says something mischievously absurd, not the way he calls Tubbo’s name or the grand plans he makes, like he could climb to the sun if he felt like it.

“I miss hanging out with you, man. I didn’t let myself think about it before. When you were just exiled. If I thought about how much I missed you, I’ll think you’re not coming home—” Tubbo cuts himself off with a shaky inhale. He hadn’t meant to speak in the present tense. “Fuck, Tommy, why didn’t you—” He stops himself. *Why didn’t you come home?*

He can’t. He can’t say it. He knows the answer. Tubbo is the one who sent him away in the first place.

“I am so sorry I didn’t save you,” that Tubbo could manage. “S-So, I miss hanging out. That was what I was saying, right? I haven’t done anything fun, haven’t gotten into any trouble like we used to. Do you remember the van? The camarvan? Do you remember stealing ingredients, and making fun of Sapnap? The forest fire? And— And we’d all sleep outside ‘cause the van was too small, and you either wouldn’t shut up and go to sleep or you’d crash right by the camp fire. Wil would sing for us, play his guitar. You’d sing to the plants! Do you remember that? We were singing to the first bit of wheat planted on our land,” he laughs. “We were so young. Feels like it just happened but like it was forever ago too, you know?” Tubbo pauses. He keeps waiting for a reply he know won’t come. *We were so young*, He’s still young. Or at least he’s supposed to be. “I miss them. I miss all of it.”

Tubbo is tired of a one sided conversation. He hates that thought that rises up, that dangerous and unanswerable question, *where’s his ghost?*

He shouldn’t be so desperate that he’s yearning for a feeble imitation. Ghostbur is not Wilbur. It still hurts sometimes to see some of the latter in the former. He doesn’t need a faded copy of Tommy reminding him of how he’s failed.

*Better than having nothing of him.*

He buries the thought, because a ghost hasn’t shown up yet. No one is coming.

“I should go,” Tubbo stands. “Quackity and me— We— you know, country stuff,” he’s making an excuse for a piece of rock and a pile of dirt. “But I’ll see you later, okay, Tommy?”

Silence. Tubbo leaves, and pretends this desperate speech somehow settles the grief in his chest.

Once the young president makes his exit, the empty grave has another visitor.

Dream stands over it, the earth had settled here now, no longer freshly turned. He’s satisfied to see there’s no divot left where Tommy’s body would have been, he’d filled it in well. Tubbo had left flowers.

Only fair that Tommy should actually get to appreciate them.

Dream takes the flowers, tucking them into his inventory. Then he heads for the portal. He’s got a long journey ahead before he gets back to Tommy. It’s been weeks. It’s time for Tommy to wake up.

—

Tommy returns to the living world with a strangled scream, overwhelmed by the feeling of a floor beneath him, the coolness of the air, his own body weak and hurting.

“Hey, hey, Tommy! It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s just me,” Dream’s voice pierces through his panic. Tommy feels a hand on his shoulder, he yelps, pulling away. Dream doesn’t let go. “Take a deep breath. You’re alive, you’re safe,” he sounds so calm. He doesn’t sound angry. Tommy doesn’t trust it. “I fixed your voice.”

Tommy’s hand goes to his throat, there’s a scar left behind, but this time he could scream. Tommy doesn’t say anything. He’s breathing hard, unsettled to be breathing at all. It felt like he’d been dead for months and months. Like he’d spent a year in a void nothingness. He didn’t get to say goodbye to Wil. Not like he’d said goodbye before, but normally he’d at least been beside his brother when Dream took him away.

“How do you feel?” Dream asks, a hand still on his shoulder. He doesn’t hold on tight enough for it to hurt. “Are you thirsty? Hungry?”

Tommy is not coherent enough to assess how he’s feeling, but Dream is looking at him and expecting answers. He forces a nod.

“I’ll get you water in a minute, first just take a second to fill me in. Your voice is back, how do you feel otherwise? How dehydrated are you?” Dream keeps talking. “This is going to hurt, but I just want to see,” Dream takes his hand and pinches the skin on the back of it, Tommy whimpers, pain so simple and small but it radiates, his nerves confused to be firing at all. Tommy’s skin stays raised for a moment, a sign of severe dehydration. “Hm,” Dream seems to make some assessment, going to get something, and at first Tommy feels hopeful that he’ll let him have water, but it’s just that godforsaken notebook. He scribbles something down before standing. “Stay right here, Tommy, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Dream leaves him there. He doesn't wall off the cell behind him. Tommy stares at that stone staircase, distant light coming down from it. It's not sunlight, but it's something.

*Dream said to stay here.*

Tommy is scared and exhausted and he's not really sure if he'll even be able to stand, but that thought rising up against his bidding is enough to get him to stand, bitterly defiant. He refuses to listen to that little voice telling him to be quiet and obey. It's worth the pain to feel like himself again. Tommy stands, slowly and carefully, concentrating all of his freshly stored awareness on not keeling over.

Next step is the stairs. Tommy hasn't eaten in, technically over 2 weeks, so he doesn't know how just trying to take a step up makes him feel like he's going to be sick. *One step at a time.* Tommy wanted to see the sun. He wanted to see *anything* other than that fucking dark room. He knows leaving like this is a good way to get himself locked back in there for another week, but that feels just as likely if he stayed down there like a good little pet. This way at least, maybe he'll get to step outside for a moment.

The top of the stairs is a narrow hallway, still lined with obsidian, two doorways branch off at either side, followed by an iron door currently open. It does not open up to the outside, nor a home of any sort. It opens up onto a cavernous room. Tommy can't hold back a yelp as falls down *another* staircase directly in front of him. The cavern is so deep it hits bedrock. The entryway to his cell was designed so Tommy couldn't see out of it.

So he couldn't see *this*. There's a nether portal to his right, two empty platforms of gold on either side of it, some redstone mechanism to his left, and distantly across the cavern a large corridor covered in what looked like item frames. Tommy knows his knees will bruise, his hands had tried to catch himself and had gotten scraped by the blackstone beneath him instead.

"Tommy?!" Dream's voice echoes in the cavern.

Tommy had made it, he'd walked himself out of that cell despite Dream telling him to stay put, but that determination did nothing to stop his fear now. He curls into a ball and covers his head with his already bloody hands. He doesn't apologize. He doesn't think apologies will make a difference anymore.

Tommy cries out in panic when he feels Dream put an arm around him and gets him to sit up from the ground.

"Shit, Tommy, I told you to stay there! You're not ready to be walking around," Dream doesn't sound angry, maybe exasperated, mostly *concerned*.

"W-What?" It's all Tommy can think to say, so taken aback as to why Dream isn't shouting at him.

"You got yourself hurt! You shouldn't be walking around," Dream sighs, shaking his head. "Here, drink this—slowly—while I get you a health pot," Dream stands again, going up the stairs towards where Tommy had come from, going to a chest in a side room. He's left

Tommy with a glass bottle of water. Tommy tries to open it, his hands are all trembly and weak, the scrapes on his palms throb as he struggles, bleeding enough that it smears on the side. He's so thirsty he almost wants to bite through the glass. Dream is gone for maybe a minute, and that's long enough that Tommy's frustration overwhelms him, clawing at the cork stopper, he snaps and smashes it on the ground.

He stares at the broken remains, in a state of shock, fear and regret turning swiftly to panic. The sight of the spilled water is enough for Tommy to feel a sob rise in his throat. No tears yet, he's too dehydrated for it. Dream had given that to him, with no stated catch or apparent reason for reward, and Tommy had wasted it.

*You're a fucking idiot, you're not gonna be able to drink again, you remember how much it hurt last time? Dream might fucking punish you for breaking it. You should start trying to clean it up now, maybe that'll be enough that he knows you're sorry—*

Still weak and shaky, Tommy tries to gather the shards of glass into his hand. Even if he hadn't been trembling, he probably still would have cut himself, but the shaking makes it worse. Tommy feels a frustrated whine rise up. Why is he trying? Like this is somehow going to bring him *mercy*?

"Hey, hey, Tommy stop!" Dream rushes back down the stairs, setting down the health pot carefully on the stone before taking Tommy's hands, making him drop the glass. "Stop," he says it firmly, like an order, but it still doesn't seem like anger. "Hey, it's okay. It's okay, I can get you another one. First, here," Dream unstoppers the health potion with ease that makes Tommy jealous and drops some onto Tommy's palms. The stinging fades to a dull ache immediately. Tommy wishes that was enough to make him relax. He's still just so fucking *thirsty*.

"I'm s-sorry, Dream, I didn't—I w-wasn't thinking clear, I'm j-just—I'm sorry," Tommy stammers out, voice trembling and hoarse.

"It's okay, Tommy. I'm not mad," Dream is still so *calm*. Tommy's frustration turns to fear. This isn't right. "Don't try and touch that stuff again, okay? I'm gonna get some more water."

Dream stands back up, returning to that side room. Tommy doesn't move this time. He just stared at the glass on the floor. His clothes are already tattered and bloody so he wipes the blood from his hands on his shirt. Tommy still flinches when Dream returns, but he doesn't have an axe, just another bottle of water and a bowl.

"Start with this," Dream sits beside him, away from the broken glass, and sets aside the bowl, handing Tommy the water.

Tommy's lip trembles as he stares at the sealed cork. "C-Can you—?"

"Sure, Tommy," Dream gently takes it back, taking out the stopper and immediately returning it. This is too kind. Dream could be holding this over him, he might've at least held back until Tommy begged. There's nothing. Dream returns the water and he just waits. "Don't drink it too fast, but you should drink."

Between fear and thirst, thirst wins out. Tommy was intending to go slow, but he can't help it, he drains the bottle like he's trying to choke. He disobeyed Dream again. He told him to go slow. Dream doesn't get mad. He doesn't even scold him, he just takes the bottle back and replaces it with the bowl beside him.

"What's..?" Tommy stares warily into the bowl, like he's expecting an eye to surface.

"It's mushroom soup. Your favorite, right?" He says it like they share an inside joke, rather than a dead pet Tommy would rather not think about. Mushroom soup was very much *not* his favorite. He had eaten it religiously because it was literally the *only food source* Dream had not forbid him from having. "I watered it down, it's mostly broth, but I didn't want you to make yourself sick."

The water had already made him feel nauseous, but starvation is a harsh teacher. He knew to eat whenever food was available because he didn't know when he would next get the chance. Thankfully, he's eaten it so much, mushroom soup doesn't taste like anything anymore. It's almost palatable.

Tommy doesn't know why he speaks. It feels stupid and risky, a half hour of kindness doesn't mean Dream isn't a viper waiting to strike. Tommy's choice in topic is just as unlike him.

"I argued with Wilbur. Left things off sort of rough," Tommy keeps staring at the bowl, but he's watching Dream out of the corner of his eye, hyper aware of movement.

Again, Dream doesn't seem *mad*, just confused. "...do you want me to send you back so you guys can like... make up?"

"N-No, i don't- please don't," Tommy says quickly. Dying isn't all that painful, but Dream's choice in method tended to hurt.

"It's okay, Tommy. I wasn't going to. you've been punished enough," Dream immediately reassures him.

Having spoken once without rebuke, Tommy gets bolder. "Why are you being like this?"

"Like what, Tommy?"

Tommy is louder. That is its own fear response, like a cat puffing up to make itself bigger. "You know what. You're... you're being all nice to me. It's not fucking normal."

Dream tilts his head, assessing him in a way that sets off a dozen warnings in the back of his head. "Would you prefer if I *wasn't* nice?"

Tommy wilts. "N-No, I'm not *saying* that, I'm just—" Tommy doesn't have an answer.

Dream stands. "Look, Tommy. I'm being nice to you because we're *friends*. I had to punish you, and I'm sorry I had to do that, but now that that's over, I don't see why we can't be friends again, right?"



Tommy wants to stay bold, to tell him they were *never* friends, that's the brave thing to do. It's not the *easy* thing to do. The easy thing is to go along with it. Eventually the ruse will break, so he might as well savor the peace while it lasts. So Tommy just shrugs.

"Glad you understand," Dream ruffles his hair and Tommy is still torn between flinching away or appreciating something besides violence.

"So... what happens now?" Tommy knows asking runs the risk of ushering the next torment, but better than sitting in a state of dread.

"I've got some other things to do, but I'll come back later to visit," Dream offers Tommy a hand, he accepts it with more wariness. "Come on," he climbs the stairs back towards the cell.

Tommy remains frozen at the bottom. "Please don't... Please, Dream don't p-put me back in there, I can't take it. I'll, I'll be good, I promise! I won't go anywhere I won't talk back, I j-just can't stay in there. *Please, Dream.*"

Dream turns back to look at him and Tommy almost wants to run for the portal.

"Tommy, I promise you, I'm not going to put you back in that cell," Dream says it slowly, carefully. "Not now, at least. Like you said, as long as you behave. I don't *want* to punish you, you know.. I only do it when you've done something wrong. So come on. I promise it won't be that bad."

Tommy wishes he would have only gone up those stairs again kicking and screaming, he wishes Dream had to point an axe at him to make him obey or at the very least put a hand on his shoulder and steer him the right direction. That's not true, though. Tommy goes up the stairs to join him of his own volition, as much as his volition is his own anymore.

Behind that mask, Dream smiles. "Thank you, Tommy. Now I'll show you." He waits until Tommy enters the corridor first, blocking his only way out. Tommy freezes. He doesn't want to go down there. "Hey, turn to the right, okay?"

Tommy glances to the left and sees a locked iron door, to the right is a hallway onto a room, one with a bed, access to water, a lectern, a chest; sparse, but still all the basics for him to take care of himself. It's lit by a single glowstone lamp, the warm yellow light shining on the obsidian.

"W-What... what is this?" Tommy remains frozen in the doorway, although there isn't a door there at all.

"It's where you'll be staying when I have to go do stuff! Well, as long as you're behaving, that other room will still be there if you're not. Look, I even left stuff for you to do," Dream opens the chest, showing several empty books and quills. "Just like mine!" Dream waves his own journal. "I'll try not to be gone too long. When I come back we'll... do stuff together."

The way he said that made Tommy definitely think he meant *I'll kill you and then I'll write about it.*

“So, do you like it?” Dream nudges him.

Tommy stares around the room. The walls are made of obsidian. A cell is still a cell, no matter what he puts in it. “Y-Yeah, it’s, er, it’s definitely better than the other one.”

“Some incentive for you to be good, then!” Dream agrees cheerily. “Well, like I said, I have to go, but I’ll see you later! I’ll bring you more food then too.”

As Dream leaves the room and heads towards the hall, Tommy follows. Dream stops, putting a hand out to stop him. “No, Tommy, you stay back there,” it’s patronizing. Like he’s scolding a dog.

Tommy’s eyebrows furrow together as he glances to the iron door around the corner. “I thought... I thought you were gonna lock me in with that.”

“What?” Dream turns and laughs. “No, no you’re too... stubborn for something as simple as that. I’d step back.” Tommy stumbles back as fast as he can, he’s expecting an explosion. Dream places a button on the wall. “Bye, Tommy.” He presses it.

Tommy covers his eyes as layers of lava fall over the corridor. Well, he still has a way out if he tries to leave through there. He’ll get to see Wilbur again. Burning alive is a new one that he has no intention of experiencing in the immediate future. He turns around, taking in the small room. It’s *better*. Tommy almost hates it more. There’s a vase of flowers next to the sink. Tommy takes a moment to smell them, but it just makes him miss being outside more. It makes him think of bees. And Tubbo. He moves away from them. He curls up on top of the bed, bitterly resenting how much softer it is than the obsidian floor. He stares at the lava. He’ll keep watching it until Dream returns.

## Chapter End Notes

whoohoo I'm back to working on this one! I've been trying to update my many other projects so this one got away from me. Either way, hope you enjoyed! Feel free to share your thoughts if you did :D

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

This fic continues to be dark! So. The usual c!Dream content, abuse. Some talk of suicide, temporary paralysis, graphic character death, human experimentation. I think that's all the warnings needed, but if any more come up please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The flowers are gone.

Tubbo stares down at Tommy's grave, mild panic rising, because the flowers he had left yesterday are no longer there. Tubbo comes here almost every day. Not for long, but he's been relatively consistent. He had left a small bunch of oxeye daisies and cornflowers on the grave yesterday, he was sure of it. Now, nothing.

"I'll be right back, bossman," Tubbo brushes a hand against the top of the headstone, murmuring softly like somehow Tommy is resting and he doesn't want to wake him. "I'll get you new ones."

If Tubbo wasn't already in a bad mood, the sight of the missing flowers had definitely deepened his gloom.

He goes to Niki and Puffy's shop to get replacements. They're rarely in, Puffy maybe sometimes, Niki never, but Tubbo takes some and is sure to leave something equivalent in its place. He could get wildflowers, but he's hoping a bouquet might be less likely to blow away. He hopes the flowers just got blown away. What kind of sick person steals flowers from a *grave*?

Tubbo chooses sunflowers this time. Sturdier. Because the ones from yesterday had to have blown away. Or taken by an ignorant enderman, or a fox maybe. If it happens again, Tubbo will be less inclined to be lenient. It's not that Tubbo doesn't think people on this server can be cruel, it's that those that he expects cruelty from could surely never be so *petty* as to steal from a grave. If they wanted to do harm, they'd take it straight to Tubbo, or a *living* person he cares for. Not something he wants to happen, but somehow more agreeable to Tubbo at the moment compared to grave robbery.

Tubbo returns, putting the sunflowers down more forcefully beside the compass. The compass's glass already has a thin layer of dirt on it. He picks it up, wiping the glass with the sleeve of his white button up. He sighs, loosening his tie. The compass just points North.

"I don't really know what to talk about today. Normally, I'd ask how *your* day has been but..." Tubbo finds grief more easily on a day like this. "Guess that's not really normal anymore, is it?"

Silence.

“Wish I had more to say to you...” He mutters. “Ranboo stayed. I think I already told you that, but without him... I dunno what I would’ve done.” He adds quickly, “I haven’t replaced you or anything. It’s different with Ranboo. He’s... He’s not my best friend, I guess he’s sort of helping me learn to live *without* a best friend... Not sure if I’ve figured that out yet.”

Silence.

It hurts worse today.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” Tubbo knows he can’t betray a dead person for leaving a little sooner, but he still feels a lump in his throat as he stands and brushes the grass from his suit. “S-So, don’t wait up,” he laughs but it sounds more like a sob. He needs to pull himself together. It’s been a month and he has a country to run.

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Tommy doesn’t know long he’s been in his cell. Long enough that he’s getting hungry. And bored. The other cell is worse, but at least he’s occupied being terrified of the walls pressing in. He’s only thinking that because he’s irritated now. Boredom is better than *that* level of fear. Tommy stays curled on top of the bed, no longer staring at the lava, but at the flowers. Oxeye daisies and cornflowers.

They’re starting to die now, a few petals have fallen. Maybe the flowers are supposed to torment him. It makes him want to be outside even more. Tommy hasn’t been outside in... well, either a month, or over half a year if he counted that week he spent dead. Either way, he misses the sun. Tommy needs to find something to do, maybe scribbling in one of those books Dream left him. He needs something, he’s overthinking *flowers* now. Maybe Dream just thought they’d fucking brighten up the place, not everything is a conspiracy. Dream had been *kind* lately too. Tommy hadn’t been called an idiot or been hit at all since Dream brought him back.

Speaking of.

Tommy hears the click of redstone, he gets to his feet immediately as the lava lowers.

“Hey, Tommy! Sorry I took longer getting back today,” Dream is warm. He *apologized* to Tommy for being late. Like Tommy is worth enough respect to warrant that. “But I think this will make up for it!” Dream swaggers into the cell and drops something on Tommy’s bed.

“Clothes?” Tommy doesn’t know why he’s so surprised.

“Yeah! It’s about time, right? You kinda smell like a corpse,” Dream teases him. “Get cleaned up and meet me out in the main hall.”

“Uh, okay, Dream,” Tommy agrees quickly, some desperate part of him hoping Dream will take him outside.

He assesses the clothes. Black jeans that he can already tell will be a bit short on him, an army green shirt with long sleeves. Nothing red nor white. No jacket which is a shame because it's *really* fucking cold down here. Something about it, it's just clothes, but somehow it feels like a uniform. Still, better than what he has right now. Tommy hadn't realized quite how bad his condition was. The tattered remains of his shirt stuck to his skin, some so much so that it was stuck to the scabbing of old wounds. He tried to be slow peeling it away at first, but it's like ripping a bandaid. He tears it away from his skin, inhaling sharply. Even with the dirty shirt now gone, he's still a mess of dried blood and filth and scabs.

Tommy doesn't know if Dream expects him to be outside soon. He wants to at least get some of the blood off. Tommy goes to the sink, taking the rag hanging off the side of it. He does his best to ignore the flowers. Tommy first scrubs at his arms, but it almost feels futile. The dried blood is stuck fast and it actually hurts to try and wash it away. Tommy is used to pain by now. He knows pain won't stop any time soon, but he could at least be clean.

Tommy eventually sits on the floor. Even as he gets rid of the blood, his skin is still a patchwork of dark splotches and red. Old bruises and wounds half healed. His hair is matted and another problem entirely, still, he tries to clean it somewhat. Just getting water on his face feels like a relief. By now the rag is ruined by blood. He throws it aside with his old clothes, the new ones are an improvement. Still, the material of the new shirt is rough. He doesn't feel like himself in them. That's like a bad joke, Tommy hasn't felt like himself in a long time.

This green is wrong. It's not like the green of Tubbo's shirt, of his bandana—

Tommy's hand goes to his throat quickly, his heart skipping a beat as panic rises. Tubbo's green bandana is gone. It's *gone*. Tommy has no idea when he lost it. It could've been weeks ago, it could've been during any number of times Dream killed him or knocked him out. It doesn't matter. The bandana is gone.

Tommy inhales shakily. He cannot cry right now. Dream wants to see him and he always gets angry when Tommy cries. Tommy sniffs, rubbing his eyes furiously.

"C-Come on, Tommy. Keep it together, man. Break down about it *later*," Tommy's voice, hoarse and weak, still trembles. Tommy is tired of losing things. He still has no clue where his compass has gone. Dream taking that from him at least made some sort of sense. Tommy couldn't find Tubbo without it, but the *bandana*? There's no practical reason behind taking that, only cruelty. *Do not give that bastard any more of your tears.*

Tommy takes one more deep breath, clinging to something like composure as he stares down at a skinny body in ill fitting clothes that he doesn't recognize. He stares at his new socks, standing out white against the obsidian.

Dream had given him a full set of clean clothes, but there's one thing missing. Dream hadn't given him shoes. Unless he wanted to keep wearing the single bloody sneaker, he doesn't have anything.

Tommy didn't have much hope to begin with, but now he's all the more sure Dream won't be taking him outside any time soon. The only exit Tommy has seen so far is the nether portal. Nothing says *you are never getting out of here* quite like the thought of running barefoot through the nether.

Tommy could spend years like this. Dream has no reason to end this state of existence for him. His new limbo could be that cell, where the only place he could hope to go is this giant, ominous room. He does his best to bury the thought. If it continues he'll go insane. Even more than he already has.

"Dream?" Tommy calls into the main hall.

"Hey, Tommy!" Dream elicits a scream as he speaks from behind him.

"F-Fucking hell, man, you scared the shit out of me—" Tommy clutches his chest, trying to catch his breath, heart pounding.

"Aw, didn't mean to, buddy. I was just getting some stuff together. I have a plan, one I think you're gonna like," Dream walks past him down the stairs, looking around the massive empty hall before deciding on the empty golden platform to the right of the portal.

Dream's words are more likely to terrify than console him, but Tommy follows him anyway. "What're these for?" He stares warily at the two golden platforms.

"What?" Dream glances at the other platform. "Right now, nothing. They're for... plans for the future." He says it like he knows something Tommy doesn't, which seems to always be the case. "Just thought this would be a good place. The rest of the room is too dark."

"...A good place for what?" Tommy glances to the portal. He isn't going to run, but he won't pretend it isn't tempting. His bare feet on the rugged grooves of bedrock beneath him tell him otherwise.

"Well, you know how I was letting you die or sometimes killing you and then bringing you back?" Dream says it like it's a simple, frivolous thing instead of a horror story. "Well, I want to keep doing that."

Tommy steps back. He knew this was coming. He isn't surprised, but he doesn't *want* this. He's so tired of it. Tommy shuts his eyes, jaw tense as if waiting for a blow. Maybe he'll get to see Wilbur again. The fact that Dream is making such a production of this plan furthers Tommy's dread. This death is going to be slow and painful he imagines.

"Hey, hey," Dream startles him again by putting his hands on Tommy's shoulders. "It's okay," he says it like he's calming a startled animal. "I said I had a plan. These experiments are important. We're... figuring out immortality together, right?" He waits, as if expecting Tommy to reply. Tommy says nothing, he just stares down at his socks across from Dream's netherite boots. "I'm going to try and make it hurt less," Dream punctuates that promise with a hug. Tommy tenses. He doesn't reciprocate. He hates how starved for touch he is that he wants to lean into this, like Dream isn't a monster just waiting for him to show such a weakness.

“Y-You’re gonna try and make it hurt less?” Tommy speaks softly when Dream finally pulls away. He hates how desperately hopeful he sounds.

“Yeah! No promises, but I have to try, right?” Dream spins back towards the platform, sauntering over to it with too much enthusiasm in his gait. It looks like a place to make a sacrifice.

“O-Or you could not kill me at all,” Tommy stammers. Every word feels reckless.

Dream doesn’t get angry. He just laughs, teasing and patronizing. “Come on, Tommy. You know I can’t do that. Like I said, this is *important*. Don’t you want me to figure out a way to make sure all your little former friends in L’Manberg don’t die?”

“Don’t understand...” Tommy mutters. “How’s killing me supposed to do that?”

“We’ll just have to wait and see, right?” Dream nods him over to the platform and Tommy obeys far too easily considering his fears. “Sit down.” Tommy obeys, then he sees the knife in Dream’s hand.

“No– Y-You said it was gonna hurt *less*,” Tommy is about to scramble back to his feet but Dream presses a hand into his shoulder, forcing him to stay down.

“Trust me, Tommy,” Dream still performs such benevolence, voice low and reassuring despite the meaning of what he says. “If you want to know what’s happening, I’m going to try and... nick your spinal cord. Just enough that the rest of your body can’t feel the pain, see?”

Tommy doesn’t speak, words snatched away by his horror. Dream is fucking insane.

“It’s only temporary,” Dream huffs. Tommy can hear the eyeroll in his voice. “Let’s just try it. If you don’t want to ruin your new shirt, can you pull it up? Just so I can actually get to your spine?”

Tommy saw the knife. He knows exactly what Dream is planning on doing and he feels sick with dread.

Still, he obeys.

“Hold still.”

He obeys.

He obeys right up until there’s a knife in his back, but Dream is quick. Before Tommy can even consider fighting back, standing up, even leaning away; through the pain of the stab wound, Tommy realizes he can’t feel his legs. Or his chest. He isn’t even sure if he’s breathing anymore. He *does* feel his head hit the golden platform hard enough he sees spots.

This is not painless, and it’s not just pain either. This is a new kind of terror Tommy can’t remember ever feeling before. Tommy already knew that he was slowly losing his free will out here, but it’s another monster entirely to have that manifest in being unable to control or

even feel his own body. It's not painless in the traditional sense either. The pain from the knife in his upper back spreads through his arms, it feels like there's another knife in his chest, and Tommy can hear his own agonizing struggles to breathe when there's barely any feeling in his lungs. Dream steps into his line of sight, stooping down to look at him.

"From the knife down, can you feel anything?" Dream asks like this is some interview, and not Tommy struggling in agony on the ground in front of him.

Tommy can't speak. Maybe he can, he's too focused on trying to breathe to even try.

Dream sighs, growing annoyed. "Just nod. Or if you can't do that, blink once for yes, twice for no. Again, from the knife down, can you feel anything?"

Tommy shakes his head and it feels like the knife is burning him, pain shooting up to the rest of his body every time he moves.

"Interesting. Does it still hurt? The knife wound, I mean."

A slow and painful nod.

"Hm. Not worth it, do you think?"

Tommy grows puzzled. It's hard to think when he's distracted with his total lack of feeling.

Dream clarifies, still just as calm and cheerful as before. "The loss of feeling, whatever pain that might prevent, it's not worth how much this hurts. Do you think that?"

Tommy scrunches up his face as the knife shifts in the wound from what he assumes is him trying to inhale.

Dream huffs, standing back up. "We'll talk when you're a bit more coherent." Dream circles him. Tommy can't even turn his head enough to look back, that's not lack of feeling necessarily, just pain and exhaustion. Tommy tries to scream when Dream rips the knife out. It's just a hoarse, whimpering exhale. Then the knife is in his chest, right over his heart.

He returns to a familiar void. He can't see Wilbur, but the sudden return of feeling, albeit the vague, distorted pain of being pulled apart, it feels like a mercy. His head is clearer now, and all he can think about is how easy it was for Dream to literally stab him in the back. He's not surprised. It doesn't exactly make him feel better either.

Maybe Dream wanted him to find the book.

Tommy read Dream's precious little notebook and Dream *changed*. Whatever vague notion of restraint he had vanished. He no longer needed to pretend, to play any role of rescuer beyond the one he actually was. Now Dream can toy with him, try different acts of violence and murder out, without any reason for secrecy.

Dream is different in other ways too. He's been friendlier lately. Even now, even stabbing him, he'd said he wanted to see if he could reduce the pain. Tommy is too foggy to try and debate whether that was genuine or not. Regardless, Dream had failed. Tommy had never



felt suffering like that before, and considering the past months that's saying something. Tommy hopes Dream doesn't pull him back too soon. He wants to rest. Maybe even talk to Wilbur if he can convince Wil to stop trying to pull him back to his train platform.

*"Wake up."*

Tommy wakes up in the exact same spot he died in, staring at Dream across from him, the shine of the golden platform hurts his eyes. Not as much as the rest of him hurts, everything aches. Not just his back, but his entire body feels like one giant bruise.

"Welcome back! So, how much did that hurt? Enough that it's not worth using it to stop you feeling the rest of your body?" Dream has his notebook out.

"N-No, absolutely fucking not worth it," Tommy stammers out hoarsely.

Dream nods, scribbling something down. "Well, next time you die, don't come complaining that it hurts too much. I gave you an alternative," he shrugs.

Tommy cannot articulate the baffled exhaustion Dream elicits just by speaking. Dream is going to kill him again. He is going to let it— or rather make it— hurt and if Tommy complains, he's going to scold him for it. Tommy hates how easy it is for him to follow Dream's logic. He should be outraged, not ashamed of the idea of telling Dream to stop hurting him. Tommy says nothing, shutting his eyes against the harsh brightness of the gold. He can feel blood on his back.

If there's ever a time that Dream might pity him, it's now. So Tommy does something stupid. "Dream, can I... Can I go outside?" Tommy's voice is so hoarse and ragged, and the question so terrifying, at first Tommy doesn't think Dream heard him.

A long pause, Dream staring at him. Dream doesn't sound angry, just this cool patronizing tone. "No, Tommy. What makes you think that's a good idea?" Dream starts to walk away, wiping Tommy's blood off of his knife.

"W-Why not?" Tommy struggles to sit up, getting to his feet on shaky legs. He does his best to ignore the pool of blood behind him. "If you're there, I won't go anywhere. I won't do anything, promise. I—I just want to see the sun. I went along with all this, I didn't fight back or even ask you to stop, see? I'll be good. Y-You hurt me a-and I'm not mad, I just want this one thing, please?"

"Why are you arguing with me, Tommy? Last time you were outside, you tried to leave your exile," Dream is cold, growing more dangerous by the second. "What makes you think you deserve this?"

Tommy frowns, debating in his head, risk over reward. Tommy cannot think of a way to earn Dream's leniency outside of being a good little lab rat, so there's no point in waiting for him to do something more deserving of Dream's praise. He keeps pushing this line, Dream could kill him, throw him in that cell for a week, stop feeding him. A dark outcome, something to be avoided, but nothing that hasn't been done to him already. If he goes quiet, he stays *good*,

and Dream puts him back in that other room until the next time he has use for him. That room is better. There's water, light, a bed. Those flowers achingly reminding him of outside.

Tommy will keep pushing. What more suffering can Dream give?

"I am going along with your experiments now! Despite everything you've done to me, I'm not fighting back! This could be so much harder, f-for both of us—" Tommy gasps, flinching back as Dream backhands him across the face.

*"Despite everything I've done to you?"* He hisses. "I punished you for *your* behavior, and *this* is how you act? You're right, this could be so much harder for the both of us, but I can *guarantee* it will be harder for you." Dream towers over him.

Tommy glares, a hand going to his stinging cheek. "You said you were my friend."

A harsh silence, Tommy refuses to flinch away first, staring at that mask, waiting for Dream to hit him again or keep walking. He wonders if Dream can hear his heart pounding against his chest. It feels like it should be loud enough.

Dream just laughs. "Of *course* I'm your friend, Tommy. Why do you think I don't want you outside? You like breaking the rules, you always have. And because I am your friend, I won't give you that chance, because then I'd have to punish you worse." Tommy flinches back, but Dream just puts a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I had to hit you, but you push too far. You can't do that, okay?"

Tommy is still wary, searching Dream for some sign of that anger. He nods.

"Good. And, you know what, if you promise not to make demands like that again, I'll let you spend today outside. How about that?"

"...Really?" Tommy does *not* trust this.

"Just this once, okay?" Dream heads for the redstone mechanism along the far wall. Tommy is frozen. "Come *on*. Don't make me change my mind."

"O-Okay," Tommy quickly joins him, heart still racing. Tommy flinches at the loud sound of the redstone, stepping closer to Dream on instinct. The platform pulls away from the floor. They're halfway up the side of the cavern when Tommy wonders if Dream is planning on pushing him off the edge.

Then they're back on stable ground in a cave. It's already warmer, which would have been a relief if Tommy weren't so nervous. Dream walks out first, Tommy following close as they go uphill. Tommy didn't know what he was expecting, but a shattered savanna wasn't it. It's warm and the breeze smells of salt. He can see the ocean for miles. It's not just a shattered savanna, it's an island. Tommy already knew he was trapped here, but stepping up onto a narrow plateau, acacia trees taking root despite the constant hum of wind, he looks out on all sides and sees nothing but blue. The water itself is far below. The fall alone would kill him, if he wouldn't be lucky enough to hit the water and drown or be broken against the rocks. Why the hell would Dream be worried about him fucking *running*? Running *where*?

“It’s pretty, right?” Dream sees him staring with wide eyes and mistakes the fear of the sublime for awe at beauty. “I wasn’t actually planning on spending the day here, so,” Dream nods him further along the island. The mountain Dream had built that elevator into towers taller still over them.

Tommy, for all his overwhelmed anxiety, still wants to stay here. Just for a bit. Tommy hasn’t felt the sun in a month, or maybe eight, depending on the dead. He’s missed feeling warm. It’s way too bright out here, it makes it difficult to see and he has to squint constantly, the scent of dry grasses and saltwater is overwhelming, that doesn’t mean he’s ready to let it go.

“Come here, Tommy,” Dream still doesn’t sound angry, he’s eerily cheerful.

“What?” Tommy can’t stop staring at that distant horizon. He is crushed by the realization that he has no idea where he is. Even in Logstedshire, he had known how to get home, he had known how to find help, even if those options had felt impossible, at least they existed. Now there is nothing. Tommy has never felt more trapped and distant. If that dark void is the afterlife, this is surely some form of purgatory.

“Like I said, I can’t stay out here to hang out with you all day, so I’ll leave you here, and come and take you back before sunset, okay?” Dream is holding a chain.

Tommy freezes, dragged from his bitter longing by fear. “What’re you– What the fuck–” He steps back.

“Hold on a minute, Tommy. *You’re* the one who was begging to be outside. This is the only way I’m leaving you out here alone.”

Tommy debates it for a moment, whether to ask to go back or let Dream do this. Like he’s ever had a choice. “O-Okay.”

“Give me your hand,” Dream waits expectantly. Tommy hesitates for another moment, looking back towards the ocean, and then the cave from which they had come. He obliges. “Just around your wrist. And then I’ll tie it to the tree.” The chain is tight enough to pinch, but not enough to cut off circulation. It’s long enough that even when tied to the trunk of a young acacia tree, Tommy can wander about fifteen feet out. “I’ll see you later then, Tommy.” Dream goes to leave.

Tommy still feels frozen, overwhelmed by the past five minutes, he snaps out of it as Dream starts to walk away. “W-Wait, Dream, you’re...” Tommy doesn’t know what he was planning on saying. *You’re really gonna leave me like this?* Obviously yes.

Dream turns back. “Oh! Duh,” Dream chides himself, shaking his head. “Thanks for that, almost forgot.”

Tommy scrambles to catch the glass bottle Dream throws at him. It’s water. It’s not a very much.

“See you later, Tommy!” Then he’s gone, back down into the cave where Tommy assumes he’ll leave through the nether. Tommy is alone.

“I...” Tommy doesn’t know who he’s trying to speak to, he stands there frozen, the water bottle loose in his hand. He stares down at the chain around his wrist, tugging at it experimentally. The only way he’d be able to get free is breaking his wrist. Staring out at the endless ocean, he realizes what a joke that is. Say he can make a boat, is he going to row with a broken wrist? If he does get free and just wanders the island, he’s as likely to fall off a cliff and break his neck. And when Dream finds him, he might tie the chain around his neck next time like a dog. As if there will be a next time.

Tommy huffs, sitting back against the trunk of the tree. At least he’s in the shade. He’s already getting warm, and the dried grasses beneath him aren’t exactly comfortable.

He’s lonely too. He isn’t desperate for Dream’s return exactly, but it’s not like he has anyone else.

He misses Wilbur.

Worse, he misses *Tubbo*.

He can’t think about them. This is the only time he gets to be outside indefinitely. Months from now trapped in that little room he doesn’t want his last day in the sun to be tainted by thoughts of everyone who had left him behind. Nor does he want to spend it mourning the fact that it is his only day.

Tommy looks around. The breeze is cooler, the air smells of salt. He forgot the noise trees made when the wind blew through them. He’s tired of missing the world. Tommy wonders where Dream got the flowers. They wouldn’t have grown out here, and Tommy finds it almost impractical for Dream to bother bringing him flowers through the nether. What’s next, is he going to bring paintings and books to decorate his fancy prison cell?

Tommy needs to stop thinking about what’s waiting underground. He can’t waste this. The more he tries not to think about wasting it, the more he feels like he is.

Tommy keeps searching what he can see of the island. It’s big enough that there could be animals out here. It would be nice to have company. Tommy leans back against the tree with a sigh. He wonders if falling asleep out here would count as wasting the day. Tommy had asked to be outside, not to be trapped in a different cage. He wants to *do* things, anything. He never thought he’d long for the days of desperately trying to hunt for food or gather firewood or find enough iron for any armor. He wants to *run*, not even to escape, but just get some of this restlessness out of him.

Tommy finishes the water when the sun is in the middle of the sky. He’d tried to ration it, but there is no way he could’ve made that little bottle last until sunset. He’s thirsty again in another hour. Hungry too. He hadn’t eaten since... he *thinks* the day before. He isn’t sure how long Dream left him alone in that room. At least he can tell time by the sun up here. Doesn’t feel as nice when the sun is so unforgiving. Shade can only do so much. He’s already rolled up his sleeves and taken off his socks. His socks already have blood on them.

Same with the back of his shirt, but he'd rather keep that. It had to do something to prevent a sunburn. He paces until his feet hurt. It does nothing to fend off the boredom. Pacing on the obsidian was still uncomfortable, the stone not so much sharp as it was rough, and here above ground the dry grasses scratch at his feet much the same.

"Er, hi," Tommy stares at an enderman— not at its face, obviously— who had chosen to stand across the field from him, a grass block in hand. "Y'know you remind me of a buddy of mine."

The enderman doesn't reply of course, just continues to wander across the island, within Tommy's sight in one blink, gone in the next.

He sighs. The company would've been nice.

Eventually he settles back against the tree. His head hurts. Everything is salty, not just the breeze from the ocean, but the taste of sweat. He had wanted to be warm again. At least he got his wish. Tommy didn't want to fall asleep, but he hasn't felt this warm in so long and he's surely growing more dehydrated by now. It's easy for him to drift.

*"Wake up."*

Tommy is startled awake by someone kicking his leg. Those two words make him panic on instinct, he's not back from the dead, but he is back to a harsh waking world. Dream stands over him. The sun isn't as bright now, finally having touched the horizon, turning the ocean red and orange.

"Y-You're back," Tommy rubs his eyes, his voice hoarse and scratchy.

"Yep! Did you have fun?" Dream is definitely mocking him as he unties him from the tree.

Tommy shrugs, weary. He wants to ask Dream for water, but he doesn't trust Dream not to deny him that out of spite. He should just wait until Dream puts him back in his room and get water from the sink.

"I told you so," Dream puts a hand on the back of his neck, guiding him forward towards the cave.

"Told me what?" Tommy asks dully, too exhausted to try and pull away from Dream's hold on him.

"You wanted to go outside so badly, and for what?" Dream laughs. "Maybe I should've told you we were somewhere hot. Although, imagine how much worse it would've been if I'd left you out in the snow?"

Tommy remembers running barefoot through thick snow, his feet burning as he tried to reach Technoblade. He shudders.

Dream seems smug, and maybe he has good reason to be. Tommy won't be asking to go outside again any time soon.

Dream stops halfway to the cave, staring at something. Tommy looks around, puzzled. The sun hasn't set, there aren't any mobs out yet, but Dream heads off to the right with an axe in hand. There's an enderman holding a grass block.

"Oh, yeah. I saw him earlier," Tommy speaks up, before realizing why Dream has his axe out. "No, don't kill him! He's not hurting anybody."

Dream looks back at him for a moment, and mask or not, Tommy can tell he said something wrong. He steps back.

Dream ignores him again. The enderman watches him approach, without any awareness that the axe is meant for it. Until Dream lands the first blow.

The enderman is gone in a flurry of purple. Tommy hopes it will run away. He knows it won't. He knows that furious shriek well as it runs at Dream, jaw unhinged and teeth bared. Dream kills it in another hit. Its dying wail echoes for too long to be natural. Tommy shivers.

*Why didn't you just run away?*

Even as he thinks that, Tommy knows. He knows something of it, at least. The way that enderman looked at Dream, like it could do nothing but try and tear into him, like it's the only choice it had to make.

Tommy wonders if his free will is much the same. He's still himself, to some extent, but there's not enough choice left to stop throwing himself in front of a sword.

"Did you talk to it?" Dream speaks up before the dying scream has fully faded.

"What?" Tommy still stares at where it had disappeared.

Dream shoves him until Tommy looks at him. "Did you *talk* to it?"

"Why the fuck would I do that?" Tommy blinks before coming to his senses, stepping further away as he expects Dream to hit him for talking back.

Dream just scoffs. "Good. I mean, you're unarmed and helpless. If you're stupid enough to look one in the eye you'll die again and I don't trust you to be smart. So don't even go near them, alright?"

"Okay, Dream," Tommy gives the answer that leads to the least aggression, even as he wants to know the truth. He doesn't know why Dream thinks he even *could* talk to an enderman. Something about that thought making Dream nervous gives Tommy hope. Like Dream is still scared that Tommy is going to slip away from him.

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Technoblade is tired of being alone out here. He shouldn't be alone with his thoughts at the best of times, let alone when his new home, meant to be a beacon of peace, was marked by bloodshed against his own best efforts. Phil helps.

Techno hadn't thought to warn him. He'd been avoiding that patch of ground on instinct, but heading towards the house with Philza close behind, he hears Phil yelp as he wipes out into the snow.

"Fucking christ, Techno, you've got some bad ice out here," Phil winces. "Don't you dare call me an old man for this one," he says warningly with a laugh, struggling to get to his feet.

"Oh, sorry, Phil," Techno gives him a hand up. "It's not normally that icy it's just..." Techno hesitates for a moment. He hasn't wanted to talk about this and he knows Philza will ask if he's okay. Too late to turn back now. "I don't know how to take care of the blood until there's a thaw. It'll get snowed over better soon, I hope."

Phil's smile drops. "...what blood, mate?"

Technoblade's jaw grows tense, his voice terse and rough. He did not want to unpack the sight of that kid choking on his own blood, looking to Techno like he could somehow save him. But it's *Phil*, if he can't be honest with him, then he has no one. "Tommy."

Phil looks horrified and baffled. "What the fuck do you mean, Techno?"

This is exactly the strong response Techno had hoped to avoid, he doesn't look at Phil head on as they head inside. He refuses to look back at that patch of ice. He hopes it isn't still fresh enough to be visibly red underneath the fresh powder. He's not going to check any time soon. "He made it to the house, Phil. Probably didn't mention that before, but yeah. He made it out here before... you know."

"Did he..." Phil struggles to get the right question together. "Seem... off to you? I don't blame you, mate, I'm not saying you could have stopped him, but what was he doing out here? How much fucking blood was there?! Because— Because I assumed he wouldn't— He wouldn't go out bloody—" Phil cuts himself off, not wanting to visualize hypothetical methods of a kid's suicide bad enough to leave a pool of blood. He continues on in disturbed curiosity. "It was *outside the house*?"

"Uh. Yeah. And he definitely seemed *off*, Phil," Techno says dryly, giving Phil a look. He doesn't understand why his friend sounds so taken aback, nor what he meant by this line of questioning. "I mean, he couldn't talk. When it happened, but he tried to," Techno frowns, unable to stop himself from going to the window and looking out on the snow. "Makes me start wonderin' if Dream was hiding something."

"Why would he... If he had something still left to say then why didn't he wait? Or... or leave a note?" This subject leaves Phil sick to his stomach, but he can't help but look for something like understanding. As of he has no intention of telling Tubbo any of this. He doesn't need to know his best friend killed himself bloody on top of everything else. "I mean, I don't know if anyone's been back to Logstedshire to *look* for a note..."

"I dunno. Maybe," Techno shrugs. "I don't see why he'd come runnin' to me if he had other stuff planned. Not sure who he would want to give a note to. I doubt he had time from the way he was running." Techno sighs, shaking his head. "Look, can we not talk about this? It isn't exactly a fun topic for conversation."

Phil's other questions died on his lips. *Do you mean running off the roof? Do you think Dream might have pushed him to that point? Why did he decide to do it out here?* None of them are voiced aloud. Techno doesn't deserve the burden of explaining the horror he witnessed.

"Sure thing, mate. Want to go check on the turtle farm?"

"Yeah, let's... Let's go around the house the other way." Techno refuses to look back out at the front yard. Even if he can't see the blood, he can't get the image of that arrow cutting through Tommy's throat out of his head.

## Chapter End Notes

Things are picking up! This isn't going to just be horror for horror's sake, and I'm hoping there's an inkling of change to come ;)

Btw, the flowers I chose for Tubbo to put on Tommy's grave, which Dream stole and put in his room, cornflowers and oxeye daisies, symbolize hope for the future and patience. Or as I like to think of it, something like "hold on a little longer. Hope is coming."

I'm sure there's a lot to unpack in that, I know I've been overthinking it :D  
As always thank you for reading, feedback is cherished <3



# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

This chapter features temporary character death and manipulation, as per usual!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The days feel long. Tommy doesn't even know what's night and day, it's just the cavernous ceiling above and Dream coming and going. Dream hasn't stopped killing him, but that's no surprise. More surprising is the empty void that always greets him, it's strange to ask to stay dead longer, and he has no intention of asking so casually, knowing the kind of harm such a request could warrant. Still, Tommy doesn't know what desperate naivety gets him to talk to Dream about Wilbur, but he does anyway.

"I... I still didn't see Wil," Tommy tries to ground himself on the stone floor. He doesn't mention how much he wanted to see him. "You brought me back immediately, yeah?"

Dream nods. "How'd you know?"

"Because it usually takes me at least a little bit to find Wil again, and I didn't get to him in time," Tommy is honest, not because he *trusts* Dream or wants to help him in his gruesome experiments, but if he's honest all the way through, when there comes a time that he *really* needs to lie, Dream would have no reason to suspect. That's what he tells himself, at least. Easier than accepting he's become an obedient little lab rat. Which he *hasn't*. He could lie to Dream if he wanted. He could run to the Nether portal the moment he sees a good opportunity. Which is something that *definitely* still feels is possible. He's not hopeless, he's just... *waiting*.

"How do you *find* someone?" Dream genuinely seems intrigued with what he has to say, sitting on the floor across from him so they're at eye level. This vault, echo chamber, shrine, prison, library, whatever this *place* is in the mountain, it's grown. Dream and him dug out a second floor above the main corridor. It's a stone room, empty and lit by glowstone, but Dream prefers this to getting blood on his golden platforms.

"Uh. It's..." Tommy closes his eyes, still feeling disoriented back in the living world. "It's hard to explain. It's like, you know when you want to get to someone, or talk to someone, over like, a ravine or a lake, or something you can't get across easy," Tommy buries the fact that his next thought is of Tubbo watching Dream drag him away from on top of that obsidian wall. He pushes on, trying to shake that cruel memory away, "but you're like, you *want* to, so something in here—" Tommy puts a hand over his heart. It beats on despite everything. "—is like, reaching out to them. You know?"

Dream doesn't reply in the affirmative, just sort of gives a neutral hum before writing it down.

"And I think part of it might just be chance, because sometimes even if I feel like I haven't been thinking about Wil much, he shows up. Or maybe it's 'cause *he's* thinking of me. Dunno. It takes some time, though. So I didn't see him this time."

"Have you tried finding Schlatt?"

Tommy scrunches up his face in distaste. "No, why the fuck would I *want* to see Schlatt? Especially enough to like, summon him or whatever."

"Well, next time," Dream is no longer merely interested. These are not requests anymore but instructions. "Find Schlatt, okay? Ask him if he knew what the book he gave me was. And *don't* go 'did you know you had a book to bring people back to life,' because he's just as likely to say yes because he wants to pretend he knows everything. Just ask if he knew what it was, do you think you can manage that?"

Tommy nods quickly, trying to commit that order to memory. He has a thought and he hesitates only for a moment over whether or not Dream will be angry if he asks. "Are you... are you wondering why if he— if he *knew* it was a revive book, why didn't he use it to save himself or something?" Tommy feels that same sick anxiety every time Dream goes quiet. Tommy knows he's implying Dream is planning to avoid his own death, which isn't irrational, but it feels like there's something dangerous about implying that Dream will ever die.

Dream thinks it over for a moment. "If you're curious, Tommy, why don't you just ask him when you see him, okay?"

Before Tommy can reply Dream puts a sword through his chest. It's not right through his heart, it's not the cleanest death he's had, but there have been many far slower and far more painful.

The void reclaims him soon enough.

Tommy doesn't want to see Schlatt. This void is the one place he doesn't have to follow Dream's orders. He *knows* he should, he has to, Dream will have questions when he gets back.

He just wants to see Wilbur again.

"Tommy?"

"Wil?" Tommy is both relieved and disappointed when Wilbur suddenly appears in the dark. "*Shit*, Wil, I was— I was trying to find Schlatt."

"*Schlatt*? Why the fuck do you want to see him?" Wilbur scoffs. He went from relieved to see him to confused and almost offended as Tommy doesn't respond amicably.

“Dream wants me to ask him something, so I *have* to, Wil. I *have* to,” Tommy is growing more panicked now. He feels out of control. He still can’t pull himself into Wilbur’s limbo. He feels useless.

“Okay, okay, Tommy. Breathe, it’s no problem,” Wilbur tries to calm him, no longer occupied in feeling unwanted, and instead clinging to the first tangible goal he’s had in months. “I’ll... I’ll see if I can find him.”

“Does that mean you’ll leave me?” Tommy wishes he didn’t sound so scared. He’s tired of feeling childish in front of Wilbur.

“I... I honestly don’t know. I haven’t had many people out here I’ve wanted to keep with me, you know?” Wilbur seems to be thinking hard. He turns around. “Oh, well, that was easy, actually!” He turns back to Tommy.

“What..?” Tommy stares into the dark. He sees nothing.

“He’s—” Wilbur takes a few steps forwards, Tommy’s fear keeps him close, even if he can’t walk through his own limbo, Wilbur’s distance away doesn’t change. It’s all intangible.

“Well, he’s passed the fuck out right now, on one of the benches in here, so. He’s useless.” Wilbur kicks something. Tommy still just sees darkness. “Oy! Schlatt! Get up.” Wilbur frowns at the dark. “Yeah, Tommy I don’t think he’s coming out of it any time soon. He smells like shit. This could takes months, man, you know how he is.”

“Dream ordered me to— to talk to him, I can’t just not talk to him! Can you try asking him if he knew what the book he gave Dream was for? Just like that, don’t mention what it does,” Tommy is growing only more desperate. Lately Dream has only left him dead for a matter of minutes— or rather in the waking world, seconds— so he could get pulled back any time.

“Tommy...” Wilbur has a moment of pity, the kind of fond look that says *I know better* that only an older brother could give. It’s irritating.

“I know you said he’s fucking out, but just *try* for me!” Tommy snaps.

Wilbur raises his hands passively, turning back around. “Schlatt!” Wilbur is shouting now, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Schlatt, come on, man, wake up! What. Book. Did. You. Give. Dream?” Wilbur speaks slow and loud, enunciating every word. He turns back to Tommy and shrugs helplessly. “Dunno what to tell you. He’s totally zonked out.”

“Fuck...” Tommy’s breathing grows shaky once more. He doesn’t even need to breathe here, why does he still hyperventilate? “Do I just tell him I had you pass along a message, but sadly no one was available to take my fucking call today?!” Tommy wishes he could punch something. He knows what broken knuckles feel like and they’re not that bad all things considered. It would be cathartic. But there is just *nothing*.

“Whoa, take a deep breath, Tommy,” Wilbur comes back over to him, reaching out to put his hands on his shoulders, sighing when as always, Tommy is somehow just out of reach no matter how close he tries to get. “You could always lie, you know?”

Tommy shakes his head furiously. “No, *no*, I can’t, because if I give the wrong answer, a-and it turns out Dream already knew the answer and- and this was some *test* I’m fucking worse than dead, man, so much worse than dead–”

“Okay, okay, I can still work with this, alright, Tommy?” Wilbur still tries to reassure him. “What if... What if you say he was drunk out of his mind and said he didn’t know what you were talking about? That means you tried, and Schlatt in usual Schlatt-fashion was too drunk to be anything but worthless, eh? Is that enough effort to keep that stupid green bitch content?”

Tommy thinks it over, able to catch his breath. If he says Schlatt was unconscious, Dream will ask him why he didn’t just wake him up. Or he’ll kill him again and tell him to wait. If Schlatt was conscious but unreceptive, surely Dream can understand that. He *knows* Schlatt. Tommy doesn’t even know if it makes a difference. He constantly feels like he’s teetering over some ledge and the wrong response from Dream could send him spiraling. “Maybe?”

“More than maybe,” Wilbur half laughs. “It’s the best you’ve got to go on, right?”

“Er. Yeah,” it doesn’t really make Tommy feel calm, but somehow a bit better. He has a plan. The rest is out of his control. He’s gone too numb to being out of control.

Wilbur’s eyebrows furrow now that the crisis has been at least somewhat averted. “What’s going on, Tommy? I haven’t seen you in *so* long. You’re still..?”

“What, trapped with Dream?” Tommy says dryly. “Yeah. He’s been killing me and bringing me back real quick, so I haven’t been able to find you when I’ve been dead.”

“Right,” Wilbur nods. “And... what about escape? How about we start the next grand plan? Are you still near Technoblade?”

Tommy feels bitter, exhausted helplessness growing an ache in his chest. He’s tired of being so frustrated about *everything* that he cries so fucking often.

“Tommy?” Wilbur tries again.

“I don’t know, Wil,” Tommy says through gritted teeth.

Wilbur doesn’t get irritated, he just folds his arms over his chest and assesses him. Tommy hates that he’s viewing Wilbur the way he views Dream. He’s waiting for some sign of anger.

“Just explain it to me, Tommy. I can try to help you.”

“I d-don’t– I don’t know where I am,” Tommy feels a lump in his throat now. “He took me somewhere, a-and I’m underground most of the time, but he let me out one day and there’s *nothing*, Wil. It’s just– It’s just ocean. I can’t see anything else. It’s this one island and there is *nothing*. There is nowhere to run.”

Wilbur takes in this information grimly, still thinking. “Maybe... Maybe you’re not actually that far. What about the nether? He’s got to have a portal somewhere. He’s not fucking

*sailing* everywhere, right?”

“Yeah, good one,” Tommy laughs sharply. “There’s a portal. That’s just one more way for me to die. I will end up in some random fucking corner of the nether with no tools, no armor, no water, *nothing*. Maybe I should give it a try, there’s what, a two percent chance I’ll stumble across another portal before something kills me?” Tommy knows Wilbur is just trying to help, but it is so fucking *infuriating* that everyone seems to think there’s some way out he’s been too stupid to consider. In exile, in the middle, between the first days and the darker ones, every visitor seemed surprised by his condition, like somehow he was *choosing* to struggle and suffer out there alone. He’s not *stupid*, or weak. Sometimes there just isn’t a way out. He’d already *tried* his one way out, and Dream just brought him back to life.

“It’s just the first thing I thought of,” Wilbur defends himself, but there still isn’t any anger. “Where does Dream stay?”

“What’d you mean *stay*?”

“You’re stuck with him, aren’t you? Where does he stay?”

“He leaves. I dunno if he leaves at *night* or what, I dunno what time it is, he just goes.”

Wilbur grows more puzzled. “What do you mean? Where are you, then?”

Tommy gives him a dull look. He’s also tired of people being surprised by how bad things really are. “Not like I can just walk out the front door, now can I? I ran once,” Tommy is so fucking tired of all of this. “He won’t let that happen again. He keeps me locked in a room.”

“O-Oh,” if Wilbur is surprised he does his best not to show it. “So, I was thinking, well... if there was a way to kill Dream in his sleep, you could take his stuff, try and find a way back.”

Tommy laughs bitterly. “Your faith in me is touching, Wil. I’m barely holding it together, let alone strong enough to kill Dream before he wakes up and kills me instead. If that were even a fucking option.”

Wilbur agrees grudgingly. He scoffs, “well, if you ever get the chance that’d be great. I’d love to knock that mask off of his smug fucking face.”

“Will do,” Tommy says dryly.

Wilbur takes a moment to think, staring at the battered tile in front of him, something dark lurking behind his eyes. “How bad is it?”

“What?” Tommy watches him carefully.

Wilbur looks him in the eye and he looks hateful. Tommy knows that anger isn’t meant for him, but he still tries to make himself smaller. Wilbur softens when Tommy responds with fear, anger exchanged for grief and helplessness. “Is being alive worse than this?” Is how he chooses to ask.

Tommy thinks about it for a moment. “I... I don’t know.” He means it. Sure, when he’s dead he doesn’t have to think about every move he makes, but at least alive there’s *something*. “He’s been... Dream has been weird lately. He’s— He’s been *nice*. Sometimes he still scares the shit out of me, but it’s like he’s trying to be fair or whatever the fuck.”

“*Fair*? What’d you mean *fair*? You said he kept you locked in a room, Tommy,” Wilbur is almost accusing.

“I know, I know, it’s not *good*, obviously,” Tommy says quickly. “But like, he doesn’t hit me as much. And it’s only when I say something stupid, you know? A-And the room he puts me in, it really isn’t that bad. He gives me food every day, which was better off than I was in Logstedshire—”

“Fucking hell, Tommy, you can’t be serious,” Wilbur blusters.

“You don’t *get it*, this is the only option I fucking have right now, I’m allowed to be grateful that it’s not fuckin’ worse, better than being miserable all my life,” Tommy grumbles. He knows Wilbur is right, he *knows*, but if he doesn’t feel grateful for *something* right now he’s going to lose his mind.

“Yeah, it’s your *only option* because he has you fucking prisoner—”

“Not like I can survive on my own anyways!” Tommy shouts back. “I died often enough that that’s fucking obvious! Things could be *so* much fucking worse—”

“Yeah, worse *how?!* ”

Tommy is rendered silent, but not because Wilbur’s jabbing question stumped him. The opposite, really. Wilbur just couldn’t understand. “You have no fucking clue, Wil, you don’t know— you don’t know what it’s been like for me.”

Wilbur falters. “No. I don’t,” he doesn’t give up yet, imploring and earnest and so deeply worried about his little brother, “you know you don’t deserve this, don’t you?”

Tommy doesn’t have a reply. Wilbur reaches out like he’s going to hug him, but just as before, he can’t get close enough.

“*Wake up.*”

Tommy is back on that stone floor. It’s sticky with his blood. Tommy remembers how to breathe, shutting his eyes against the soft light of the glowstone.

“Welcome back,” Dream is still there, notebook in hand.

Tommy remembers his task with panic. He has to refocus, he *cannot* be a mess still half dead, but even the soft light hurts his eyes and the stone beneath him is sharp and cold and he *hates* how the blood sticks and clings to him—

“I tried to give you enough time to, as you said, *find him* or whatever.” Dream continues, interrupting Tommy’s spiral. “What did he say?”

“Right...” Tommy catches his breath. He feels like he might throw up if he lies. He tries to focus on Wilbur’s reassurances and not on their final argument. “H-He said he didn’t know what the fuck I was talking about. But he was really drunk, so, he might’ve meant it.”

“He was *drunk*? What the hell do you mean– he’s *dead* how can he be drunk? Are there *objects* in the afterlife?” Dream seems too intrigued by this new information to think that he’s lying.

“He just... He just drinks. He’s passed out most of the fucking time, so,” Tommy knows he can’t hesitate, but he still swallows thickly before the lie. “Lucky I caught him while he was awake for a change, eh?” Tommy laughs sort of hoarsely without knowing why. He’s quick to move on. “Wil still smokes. Fucking annoying, really.”

“And did you see Wilbur?”

Tommy hesitates again. Honesty whenever possible. “Yeah. I did. I dunno if he was hanging out with Schlatt before or if I accidentally got them both.”

“Hm. What did he say to you?”

Tommy feels frozen, he drags his fingernails against the stone floor beneath him. “He asked if I was okay. A-And I told ‘im I’d talk in a bit, ‘cause I needed to see Schlatt because I didn’t know when you’d take me back.”

“What does he know? Wilbur, I mean, what does he know about me?” Dream still sounds calm and neutral, but Tommy knows they’re quickly moving into dangerous territory.

“Like, about what?”

Dream grows more irritated. “Come on, Tommy. Don’t be stupid. *Anything.*”

“He, er,” Tommy feels like he’s navigating a minefield, consumed by flighty terror as he waits to stumble or misstep. “He knows you bring me back to life and shit. He knows you’ve been watching me in my exile. That’s about it.”

“Really?” *Now* Dream doubts him. Tommy hadn’t even really lied there.

“He thinks I should just go home. I’ve tried to explain that I can’t do that.” The moment Tommy says it he regrets it. It’s a dangerous truth, not the most dangerous, but any implication of Tommy leaving is a threat waiting to happen.

“I’m glad you explained,” Dream is calm and utterly disingenuous. “You’re right. You *can’t* go back to L’Manberg.” Dream stands. “Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to them. After all the work they’ve done moving on. You’d ruin it.” Dream offers him a hand off the floor.

Tommy accepts, a sinking feeling in his gut. “Right... ruin it...”

Tommy, as per his habit it seems, does something stupid. “I’ve been... I’ve been good, though, right?”

Dream is immediately suspicious, arms folded over his chest. “What do you want, Tommy?” That tone should’ve been enough to make Tommy stop. His poor impulse control hadn’t improved so far, it wouldn’t improve now.

“Well, could I... could I see Tubbo?” Tommy feels like he’s asking for the sun itself.

Dream, instead of anger, laughs. “Good one, Tommy. What next, do you want me to send you back in time to the good old days of L’Manberg? How about your disc, do you want that?”

Tommy feels his cheeks burn red. “N-No, I– I just meant... If I could see him, even from a distance, just to know he’s still alive–”

“If he were dead you’d know, right? You would’ve run into him by now,” Dream’s amusement is fading to cold irritation.

“Well, yeah, I guess, but just, to see if he’s okay. You said he was moving on, and if he’s better... I just want to see. Y-You could blindfold me so I don’t know where we’re going, right? Or you could kill me and bring me back once we get there!” Tommy feels like he must sound insane. Dream found it funny the first time, if Tommy moved on now he probably wouldn’t get angry. Why does Tommy keep *pushing*? He already knows he’s suicidal, this was next level idiocy.

“Fine, Tommy, you know what? Fine. How about I put you right back where I found you, hm? He’ll visit your grave and you’ll be back where you belong six feet under,” Dream turns to malice in an instant, stepping forward and pressing an accusing finger into his chest. “Don’t worry, I’ll bury you still alive, so maybe you’ll live long enough to hear him talk about how much better off they all are without you, right? Don’t look so beat up about it. I’m giving you an offer,” Dream towers over him in that stupid mask. “Because that is the *only* place Tubbo will see you. Unless you want me to kill him too.”

Tommy tries not to stumble back. He manages to catch himself before he ends up cowering against a wall. “N-No. I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to– I wasn’t thinking. Fuck– I’m so sorry, I w-won’t– I won’t ask for shit like that again, that was wrong.”

Tommy seems panicked enough that Dream backs off. In an instant he returns to that facade of benevolence.

“It’s okay, Tommy. I already knew you said stupid stuff. You’ve been like that as long as I’ve known you. I’ll let it slide this time,” Dream turns and continues his way downstairs. “I mean, why would you even want to go back? That’s where Wilbur died, right?” Dream continues. A pause, Tommy trailing after him warily without reply. “Wilbur didn’t get a funeral, did he?”

“What? No,” Tommy refocuses, surprised by the change in subject enough that he forgets to be docile and afraid.

“Did you guys just dump his body somewhere, or what?”



“I dunno,” Tommy feels an unsettling dread in his gut. He doesn’t want to think about that day. “Never found it. I– Well, I guess I sort of... It was probably the withers, eh? Destroyed his body with the rest of it, maybe?” Yet again Tommy is desperate to ask what the fuck he means, but he knows better than to continue.

“Yeah. Maybe. I’ve got some stuff to do, but I’ll be back later. I’ll bring you food then, okay?”

“Okay,” Tommy replies more on instinct than thought. That question lingers, unsettling and cruel. He should’ve searched harder for Wilbur’s body, but maybe finding what ever remained after the withers tore through him would’ve been worse. A *lot* worse.

Dream doesn’t ask him to speak to Schlatt again. The deaths and following resurrections are quick.

Still, it continues. Every day Tommy tries to bury the thought that this will be the rest of his life. Denying that fact is vital to maintaining his sanity. Acceptance isn’t even an option.

Tommy knows Wilbur didn’t abandon him. He just hasn’t been able to find him in those brief hours spent in limbo. Sure, it felt like it should’ve been long enough, and Tommy desperate enough to find him, that it would actually work, but Wilbur was just... somewhere else. A dead man can’t abandon him. At least not again. He feels alone either way. Dream hadn’t even been particularly cruel as of late. Still, it was the strangest thing to be tasked with helping to plan his own murder.

“Tommy, Tommy, come here,” Dream waves him over from across the hall. That other iron door, always locked when Dream isn’t in it, is a library. Tommy isn’t allowed to touch the books. He learned that early on. “So, I was thinking for today– and let me know if this is too much, you’ve been very brave lately– but I was thinking we could see if other injuries heal post revival? Or at least to what *extent* they heal, you know? Something simple, though, like, a nice clean break on your arm, so you can still walk around if it doesn’t work, right?”

Tommy knows he should feel lucky that Dream is asking him at all. Every word he says still leaves him feeling like he’s burying a scream, like he should be fighting back somehow. Wilbur’s desperate warnings are fading. He hasn’t seen his brother in a long time now, even longer for him. Tommy’s voice remains soft spoken and hoarse, tired and without anger or indignation at Dream’s offering. “You– I mean, *we* already know that one, don’t we, Dream? F-From when you broke my leg when I... when...” Tommy does not want to bring up the day he tried to run, like somehow that will awaken that same wrath.

Dream pauses for a moment and Tommy forces himself not to step back. Dream claps him on the shoulder and pretends not notice Tommy flinch. “I forgot about that one, Tommy! Good call. That was smart, how could I forget?”

“Thanks...” Tommy bites the inside of his cheek and feels ashamed that Dream’s praise feels important somehow. *Praise* won’t change whatever plans the man might have. He’s scared Dream’s alternative proposal will be worse than a broken bone and he’ll live– or rather die– to regret it.

“Do *you* have any ideas, Tommy? Anything you’re curious about?” Dream is horribly genuine, like an enthusiastic teacher rather than abductor.

Tommy hesitates. He genuinely *wants* to request a certain death, not that he knows what, but this is an ounce of control. He would decide the amount of pain this caused.

Tommy feels almost panicked, trying to think of something, but his thoughts just become a blurry wave of *what doesn’t hurt? what doesn’t hurt? what doesn’t hurt?*—

“What if we keep digging out those other rooms for a bit? You can just let me know if you think of anything,” Dream notes his petrified expression and moves on, nodding him back out into the hall. This is too merciful, Dream too *considerate*, and Tommy wishes he didn’t feel relieved.

Dream had been expanding. Tommy thinks the mountain is beginning to feel like an ant hill. A stone staircase branches off next to Dream’s library to another corridor directly above lined with rooms. The rooms themselves weren’t exactly *peaceful*. One had a deep pool of water, another across from it with lava, one dedicated to making health potions, and more still being dug out.

“It’s practical, to section things off a bit, you know? So if something we want to test comes up, things are already set up.” Had been Dream’s reasoning. Tommy didn’t *care* about Dream’s reasons. He just wanted to know when Dream planned on drowning him, burning him alive, whatever other themed rooms of torment he’d make next. Nothing had come of them so far, they’ve been all but decorative except for the empty one where Dream had killed him the last few times. Tommy should’ve felt some relief that Dream was having him help do something besides hurting himself, but it was hard to focus on mining when all he could think about is *what’s gonna go here? When is he going to kill me next?*

It’s almost more anxiety inducing how *careful* Dream seems to be with him now. He shares his plans with Tommy and asks for his opinion, he mentions logistics he’s thought of to make a death quicker or less painful, he often asks if Tommy is okay when he comes back. Tommy almost finds it calming, and that just makes it *more* unnerving.

“Hey! I got more flowers for your room,” Dream seems to remember something. “I forgot about them for a bit, so they’re a bit dead, but all the more fitting, right?” He laughs and offers Tommy wilted sunflowers. Tommy hesitates. “Don’t be scared, Tommy. They’re for you!”

Tommy takes them grudgingly.

“From Tubbo, no less.”

Tommy’s hold on the flowers becomes a deathgrip, crushing the thick stems. “W-What?”

Dream turns back to look at him like he’s being stupid for a reason. “They’re from *Tubbo*,” he repeats it slowly. Tommy still stares at him in stunned silence. “He left them on the grave for you! It was a while ago, that’s why they’re all busted up. Tubbo doesn’t have time to visit often, but still, he left you those, isn’t that nice? Maybe you’re *not* totally forgotten,

Tommy! Or,” Dream turns back to the new room they’d been working on, his carelessness is deliberate, “he might just feel like that’s something he’s supposed to do, you know? I mean, he’s part of the reason you’re *dead*,” he says that last word mockingly.

Tommy still feels frozen. Or like he might be sick. He just stares at the floor, holding onto the flowers.

“*And* sunflowers were a good pick and he didn’t even know it! You can’t see the real sun, so you get those instead,” Dream just keeps talking. “Tommy?” Dream looks back to see his good little labrat fixated on nothing. “Aw, did I break you?”

Tommy glances back up to him in mild, numbed surprise.

“Nothing a hard reboot won’t fix,” Dream swings his pickaxe into Tommy’s skull before he can even fathom a reply.

Tommy drops to the ground like a ragdoll, a pool of blood already growing.

“Hm,” Dream stares down at him. Tommy has crushed the flowers further in the fall. As if they weren’t already ruined by blood. He wonders how long it will take before the amount of blood on these floors is significant. He’s just glad that Tommy’s corpse comes back if its intact instead of starting anew. The vault would be littered with dead Tommys by now. Dream wipes the gore from his pickaxe methodically. That was unnecessary. He knows it was. He *said* he would stop killing Tommy on a whim, but sometimes it’s just too *easy*, it feels too right. Tommy had been behaving as well. Dream will have to work hard to think of an excuse.

As if he *needs* an excuse anymore. Every voice of reason that might’ve turned Tommy against him is... carefully controlled by now.

Speaking of.

Dream leaves Tommy there. It’s not like he’s going anywhere. He forgets how silent this place is, how much his footsteps echo when not followed by that little shadow. Tommy doesn’t fill the silence with chatter. He hasn’t since they left Logstedshire, but Dream is sure to occupy Tommy with praise or rebuke, anything to keep that kid on his toes. Dream returns to his library, reaching behind a row of books to a lever.

The click of redstone, a long narrow hallway into the dark.

Dream hums to himself as he approaches the sliding door of obsidian at the end of the corridor. He flips another lever and the stone slides out of place, a redstone lamp flickering to life in this new cell, a copy of the one Tommy had spent those hellish two weeks in.

Dream stares smugly down at the new temporary resident of his museum.

Wilbur Soot glares back.

## Chapter End Notes

:) sorry to leave you all on a cliffhanger, but I couldn't resist!

as always, feedback is cherished <3

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

character death, Dream being scummy, grief, the usual!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream had thought it would be harder. He knew Ghostbur was naive, malleable, but he hadn't expected him to follow him in the dead of night up to the cliffside where his counterpart had died without question.

"What is it you want to show me, Dream?"

"You'll know soon, Ghostbur."

"Alright! How's Tommy?" Ghostbur drifts ahead, humming to himself. "Did you know I live near here? I live in the sewer! I've got so many books! Would you want to see them?"

"Maybe in a bit, Ghostbur. I, uh, I have my *own* book I'm reading right now," Dream reaches for his current copy of the revive book. He burns through these like wildfire. He has to write out copies regularly. Maybe he should teach Tommy just to get him to be a scribe. A matter for later.

"Oh! What's it about? History books are my favourite," Ghostbur tries to get a peak over his shoulder, but all that does is get him within reach.

"Hold still for me, will you?" Dream slowly pulls his axe around Ghostbur's neck, the blade coming closer, so the ghostly figure backs up into Dream, trying to put some distance from the blade.

"D-Dream? What're you... what are you doing..? Can you let go?" Ghostbur falters, not quite petrified, but confused and worried. His wide, pale eyes look over at Dream who persists unfazed. He doesn't even realize it's too late to try and run.

"No. No, I can't," Dream says coolly, eyes scanning the book in his left hand. The god had stopped showing up for the revivals early on. That didn't matter as long as the book still worked, and Dream thought it made sense, only another sign that *he* is a god now in his own right. Dream can't deny the rush of bringing the axe closer and closer, using the book, watching death itself bend to his will. Ghosts don't bleed, but they might as well for the wailing that pain causes either way.

"Dream... Dream, that h-hurts, please let go of me. *Please*—" Now the ghost catches on, at least enough to beg, but not to fight. Ghostbur never fights. An axe cutting through him, something dark and otherworldly trading an unlife for a life, and for once the ghost knows

terror. Dream had never heard Ghostbur scream before. He doesn't sound like Wilbur. "No, *Dream, please! Dream! I don't want to die—!*"

He's gone. No body nor blood left behind.

Or maybe there *is* a body, one stirring on the ground not far from him now.

Wilbur looks gaunt, his eyes sunken and empty, his skin a watery grey in the moonlight. He's flat on his back, eyes open and staring at the darkened sky. Dream had forgotten how skinny Wilbur had gotten in Pogtopia. The paleness he assumed had to do with time dead, as with the weakness in his limbs. Wilbur struggles to sit up, staring around wildly, like an animal caught and released. Dream doesn't speak yet. If Wilbur wants to gawk at feeble moonlight and greenery he's welcome to. He won't be seeing it again. When he gets to his feet he stumbles.

"Hello again, Wilbur," Dream almost feels nostalgic for the chaos they had caused so long ago. Wilbur doesn't look like he feels much of anything, he just stares from sunken eyes, a waxy corpse standing upright. It's almost eerie. Dream feels a flicker of annoyance. Maybe Wilbur had come back wrong. He's not talking, he's not *reacting*, he just stares.

Wilbur stares at him, his eyes are paler than Dream remembers, brown muddied with grey.

"You're alive. You're by L'Manberg," Dream speaks to him slowly. "Don't worry, I'm gonna take you to T—" Before Dream can get another word out there are hands around his throat, this skeleton of a man having surprising strength and he shoves Dream into the cliffside, trying to bash his head into the stone, choking him, teeth bared.

Fresh out of decades dead, disoriented, unsure, and Wilbur is trying to strangle Dream. He's still unaccustomed to being alive, but he doesn't need to be to be vicious.

"I'll fucking kill you, you son of a bitch!" Wilbur snarls, pulling Dream forward only to slam him back into the stone with all of his strength.

Through Dream's netherite helmet it's irritating at worst.

Dream swings the blunt side of his axe towards Wilbur's head. If this kills him, it's not like it matters anyway. Wilbur still has a tight hold on his throat, like he's trying to drag Dream down with him when he collapses.

Dream takes a deep breath, staring down at the crumbled revolutionary. He's still in that bloody coat of his. His hair is different. It has a streak of white at the front. Dream wonders how long he'd have to keep Tommy dead before that happens to him.

Dream is also surprised at how easy it is to carry Wilbur, throwing him over his shoulder and heading towards the nether portal. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised. Wilbur still seems like half a corpse.

Everything about this feels almost too easy, it all had worked out in his favor so far. Wilbur was the last thing out of his control. Not anymore.

~

Dream crouches down so he's at Wilbur's eye level. He's conscious now, and seems just as furious as the night prior. Dream had taken the appropriate precautions, of course. His old partner in chaos is gagged and bound, just to be sure Tommy hadn't heard screaming through the walls during the day. That doesn't stop Wilbur from trying to shout what Dream imagines to be very rude abuse at him.

"Yeah, go ahead try and scream. Tommy won't hear you," Dream remains smug and unforgiving. "That mouth is what got you into trouble in the first war, right?" Dream reaches out and pats Wilbur's cheek in some weak imitation of fondness.

Wilbur struggles all the more viciously at this, yanking against the ropes around his wrists, trying to lean away, but his eyes remained locked on Dream's mask, like he can somehow tear into him with a look. His glasses are cracked in the corner of one lens and dried blood clings to his forehead. As if he didn't look unstable already.

"Don't you worry, Wilbur. This isn't permanent," Dream glances around the cell in the dim orange light of the redstone lamp. "You'll be dead again before you know it. Still, until then, you might want to learn some respect. Maybe you've forgotten, but being alive hurts. And *I'm* the one who decides how much."

Wilbur scoffs, rolling his eyes, the best means he has to express his contempt.

"Oh? Not scared, are we?" Dream feigns surprise. "Well... if you're not worried about being hurt, I can always take it out on Tommy, right?"

Wilbur narrows his eyes. What he would give to rip Dream's tongue out right about now.

"What? Nothing to say?" Dream mocks him before reaching out and taking the cloth from Wilbur's mouth.

Wilbur's first effort is to try and bite Dream while he's still in reach, Dream pulls back quickly, laughing at the attempt.

When that fails, his anger continues full force.

"I am going to rip you to fucking pieces. You sick motherfucker— You're a dead man walking, alright?!" Wilbur is shouting in an instant, still struggling against the ropes.

"Now, come on, Wilbur. You don't talk like that to someone you owe your life to," Dream scolds him, belittling and unfazed. "Tommy was a slow learner too, but don't worry, I taught him and I can teach you too."

Wilbur is silenced for maybe a moment, caught off guard by Dream being so blasé about torturing his baby brother. He continues, no longer shouting, but every word still weighted with fury and the promise of violence. "I... am going to rip your fucking spine out," he hisses. "You're gonna regret bringing me back, man, 'cause when I get my hands on you I'm gonna make you suffer. You're pathetic, d'you know that? Everything you've done, there's

no *greatness* behind it, look at you now, everything you've done, everything you *are* doing, getting a high off of beating up a kid because you *know* you're just some weak little man—"

"Shut up—"

"You and your feeble little god complex, surely you must know how worthless it all is? You're not gonna *win* anything, alright? You're just too much of an arrogant fucking prick to think of anything beyond childish—"

Dream backhands Wilbur across the face, sending him to the ground. "I said shut up!"

Wilbur, first startled by the foreign feeling of nerve endings responding to pain, a new living body damaged and unnatural protests the very thought of touch. Still, he pushes on, struggling to sit up. There's a moment of pause, Dream standing over him victorious. Wilbur manages a barking laugh, an echo of the insanity from Pogtopia persisting, far from dissuaded.

"Ha! Throwing a tantrum, are we? Oh I should've fucking known from the moment I met you, you are *nothing* without some shred of power over people more vulnerable than you, that's not fucking *strength*, Dream, that's a sign that you're *compensating for something*—"

"Wilbur, if you don't shut up I'm going to break Tommy's fingers," Dream interjects, voice eerily calm despite the anger lurking behind every word.

Wilbur falls silent immediately, breathing heavily, staring with that same level of hatred and maybe something more like victory. It worked. Dream had been affected in some way. Wilbur hates how easy it was for him to be silenced, but he knows for a fact Dream is good to his word.

Dream smirks behind that mask. "Better. Do you know why you're here?"

Wilbur just stares, imagining ripping that stupid mask off and shoving it down his throat.

"You can answer," Dream takes his silent loathing for fear, that's what he's grown to expect from Tommy. "Actually, I'm *telling* you to answer, so. Go on."

Wilbur's jaw is tense, eyes now locked on the floor. It takes more willpower than he's had to use in the past decade not to spit more insults. "No," he forces the word out through gritted teeth.

"Well, I'll tell you, Wilbur. You've been a nuisance to me lately, even from beyond the grave, well, I mean, not like you *had* a grave, but the point stands." Dream gets back up, leaning against the doorframe of the cell. "See, you've been giving Tommy these ridiculous notions of *fairness* and *escape*. And I can't let that continue," Dream pauses, expecting a retort. Wilbur keeps his silence. "I've almost fixed him, you know. Tommy follows orders, he keeps his mouth shut, he knows his place. You're not gonna ruin that for me."

"Hey, don't give me credit. I never needed to teach Tommy how to spot a coward or a weak link..." Wilbur scoffs half under his breath, staring at the obsidian floor. His mouth is dry.



Wilbur can't remember the last time he'd felt thirsty.

"Hm. A broken thumb."

Wilbur glances back up to Dream's face, or rather mask, with confused trepidation.

"No, please, keep talking," Dream nods him on. "I'll get to break both of his thumbs so it's symmetrical, and I'll be sure to tell him who's responsible for his punishment."

"No you won't," Wilbur has had thirteen years to lose all filter. It's a hard habit to break. "If he knows I'm here that sets you back leagues, doesn't it? He'll be suspicious of you, resent you more than he does already. Tommy won't stop hating you."

Dream seems to mull it over a bit. "Okay, good. That's both thumbs then."

Wilbur feels sick. For once he needs to learn to stop talking.

Dream waits for Wilbur to continue. He doesn't.

"You're learning," Dream laughs softly. "Faster than Tommy did, for sure. You speak when you're spoken to, got it?"

Wilbur forces himself to nod, managing not to give more insults by picturing Dream getting torn apart by wolves.

"Good. Your first stay here will probably be your longest," Dream isn't telling Wilbur any of this for practical reasons. It's a shameless power trip, a fresh captive audience not yet as pathetic as Tommy. "Weeks."

Wilbur's cautious worry shows on his face.

"Do you have a question, Wilbur?" Dream invites him to speak, a patronizing teacher.

Wilbur focuses on Tommy, refusing to let Dream ignite his anger and another excuse to hurt his little brother. "If it's weeks... why do you want Tommy dead that long? Is he... is he gonna be dead the whole way through?"

"Why do you care?" Dream's retort is cagey.

"Why do I *care*? 'Cause I'm a fucking person with empathy for others you sick prick," Wilbur spat.

Dream shakes his head. "Careful, Wilbur. Tommy still has eight other fingers to be broken."

Wilbur pauses, his next reply careful, forcing his tone into something more docile. "I... don't see why you need to kill Tommy for so long. Whatever you're trying to figure out, couldn't you just kill me?"

Dream stares at him for a moment, debating answering, just because it's satisfying to see *the* Wilbur Soot waiting anxiously for *his* word. "I want to see how rot works. How decay

affects resurrection.”

Wilbur shudders, disgust and horror uncontainable. He’s been overwhelmed by feeling since he’s been back, but *rage*, rage he had plenty of over the past decade, without any filter needed. He wants to tear into Dream again, call him a coward, call him diseased. He can’t.

Wilbur thinks through what he is going to say. Finally, the great rebel forced to bow to an authority. “I still don’t understand. Why don’t you just kill me to see it, then?”

Dream exhales a laugh. “Why do you want to be dead so bad?”

Wilbur stares at him, silent and wary. He won’t tell Dream the reason is he doesn’t want Tommy to be alone in limbo for so long, but... Wilbur glances around the cell, back to the smug man towering over him. Maybe being alive here is worse.

“I... am worried he’ll come back wrong somehow,” is what Wilbur says instead.

“Wrong? Wrong how?” Dream scoffs.

“Being dead that long, man, it changes shit, doesn’t it?” Wilbur feels like he’s bargaining for Tommy’s sanity.

“You came back fine.”

Wilbur squints doubtfully at him, “I mean, *did* I?”

That gets another laugh. Wilbur knows he can’t charm his way out of this one, but it has to help, surely. What a joke.

“Okay, still. Why are you trying to help him? You were happy to hurt him and leave before. Don’t tell me all that time alone made you suddenly want to be a good person. What, it’s only okay if he gets messed up because of *you*? And you said *I* had a god complex.”

This leaves Wilbur silent. *Dream* of all people telling him how much he hurt Tommy. It cuts deeper because it’s true.

“How long?” Wilbur asks quietly, staring at the obsidian floor. He can still remember that glimpse of moonlight. The way the air tasted. He’s alive again, but he knows he won’t get the chance to *live* again.

“What?”

“How long are you planning on keeping Tommy dead for?”

“Why do you think you deserve an answer?”

Wilbur glances back up to him from hollow, weary eyes. “Please.”

“Hm,” Dream considers him for a moment, clearly enjoying himself. “How about you tell me something first.”

“What?” Wilbur sighs wearily.

“Tell me about limbo.”

Wilbur narrows his eyes. “What exactly do you want to know?”

“What was yours like?” Dream nods. “And don’t think about lying to me. I know everything Tommy knows.”

Wilbur scoffs. *Doubt that.* “It was... a train station platform. Empty. Nothing much to it.”

“Was it... dreary? Lonely?”

Wilbur glares at him. “Fucking obviously. It’s *limbo*. Schlatt and Mexican Dream don’t exactly make for riveting company.”

“Tone, Wilbur,” Dream says warningly.

“Sorry,” the word tastes like bile on his tongue. Wilbur grimaces, forcing himself to continue. “Limbo is shit, okay? That’s... that’s about it.”

“Hm. Good,” Dream mulls it over. He needed to be sure that if killing Wilbur again brought back Ghostbur, he wouldn’t remember anything. Wilbur is just the slippery sort to try and send a message to someone on the outside through his own ghost. “I guess you’ve earned your answer. However long it takes for his corpse to decay to some extent.”

Wilbur remembers his horror. He stammers out, “t-that could take *months*—”

“Yeah, well. Don’t worry, I’ll probably leave him outside to speed things up a bit,” Dream waves him off.

“A-And you’re not *worried* about the kind of fucking damage that could do—?”

“I mean, I didn’t have *your* corpse. You had to manifest a whole new body, surely the revive book can handle some rot,” Dream is almost taunting him.

“Please, why can’t you just kill me?” Wilbur spent thirteen years waiting to come back untouchable and victorious. If he had survived all that time alone, he’d really convinced himself it would’ve made him stop caring enough to feel stronger than other people. A matter of hours back and Dream is already twisting the knife in his one weak spot.

*Tommy doesn’t make you weak. He’s why you’re being strong now.*

“*Because* as long as you’re dead, Tommy can’t be! Do you *really* expect me to spend weeks and weeks with that kid still breathing and not end up strangling him?” Dream scoffs. Wilbur just stares, bitter and furious not at Dream’s mocking humiliation, but the fact that he’s alive again and he can’t even break Dream open. He’d told Tommy given the chance he’d disembowel the man. He’s just as powerless here as he was in limbo.

Dream tilts his head, taking in Wilbur's misery with something like fondness. "Fine, *fine*," he stops leaning against the doorframe, crouching down again so they're eye to eye. "How about this, if you can kill yourself for me. *Right now*, then Tommy lives. You'll be dead instead."

Wilbur stares at him, not quite surprised that Dream has responded with a cruel joke, but no less irritated by him. Dream is not just asking to mock him. He needs to see if Wilbur will do it. He needs to know if he should worry about Wilbur finding a way back to Tommy behind his back.

"Go on," Dream gives a nod of encouragement. "Do it. Now, I know you're tied up, but you were always the creative type, right? I'll even give you an idea," he gestures to the back wall. "Just bash your head in. Come on."

Wilbur says nothing, no longer looking him in the eye and instead staring at the floor like he can burn holes into it.

"Or maybe strangle yourself with the ropes around your wrists! I bet you could manage that."

Wilbur refuses to engage. He won't entertain this man if he's not offering a shred of real mercy.

"Aw, I thought you *cared*, Wilbur! You wanted to help Tommy, didn't you?" Dream stands back up. "I guess I shouldn't have expected so much of you. You were too much of a coward to do it yourself the first time around, right? Too much of a coward to hurt Tommy yourself and too much of a coward to save him yourself."

Wilbur refuses to let Dream wound him. *He* knows he's failed Tommy. Dream gets no part in that. That guilt is *his* alone, untouched by this pathetic bully masquerading as a god.

"Alright, then. I'll check on you in a couple of days. Just to make sure you don't die of thirst. See you later, Wilbur. Welcome back to the land of the living," Dream chuckles, the obsidian sliding back into place on a Wilbur Soot now drained of fight.

~

Tommy has been dead for three months. Tubbo hasn't moved on.

It seems like everyone else has.

Fundy had moved out within the first month. The rest stayed, but none of them stayed the same.

"Tubbo, please. It's been long enough, if we don't make plans now, when will we?" Quackity had returned to his original target. Tommy had been buried long enough that Quackity wants blood. Technoblade is back on the chopping block.

"I don't know, Quackity. Maybe never," Tubbo waves him off and keeps walking. He just wants to sit in the apiary and watch the bees. He's tired of working for a country that has done nothing for him.

“Are you serious, man? If anyone should want Technoblade gone, it’s you! You know he blew your fucking face off, right?!” He snaps, growing sarcastic and rueful against his own bidding. Quackity is tired of feeling powerless.

Tubbo stops. Quackity goes too far. Tubbo jaw is tense, bitter resentment gnawing inside of his chest. He knows. He knows— of course Tubbo fucking *knows* as if he wasn’t haunted by nightmares of the box and the fireworks—

Not anymore. He has new nightmares now. Tommy begging him to save him.

“Get out,” Tubbo’s voice trembles.

“What?” Quackity laughs shakily, gesturing to the platform they’re on. “Get out *where?*”

“Just get out! Get the hell out of L’Manberg! I don’t want to hear it, Quackity! I don’t want to see you again today, got it?!” Tubbo shouts at him and it does nothing to stop the yawning hole in his chest. Grief hasn’t let go. Not even a little.

“I was trying to *help*—”

“Don’t give me that shit, Big Q. You’re helping no one but yourself.” It’s cruel. Tubbo doesn’t think he really believes that.

Quackity looks taken aback, finally silenced. He steps back. “Fine... Fine, I’ll... give you some time to think about it.” He leaves, but the anger stays in his wake.

Since Tommy Tubbo has felt less inclined to try and keep everyone together. He stopped trying for a second and everything started falling apart. Tubbo hadn’t realized that he was the thread keeping them there. The tension alone would’ve broken him if he hadn’t gotten out of it somehow. He wish it had crushed him instead of taking Tommy from him.

He used to love L’Manberg. Now all he can see here is everything he’s lost. He’s so angry, all the time. He’s never felt more tired.

He goes to sit in the apiary, lets the sound of the bees buzzing drown out his thoughts. Since the Red Festival, Tubbo has had a faint ringing in his ears. The sound of the bees quiets it somewhat.

He hears the outer door to the apiary open and his anger wakes up.

“What did I fucking say, Quackity?! Do you *want* me to fire you—” Tubbo turns to shout at whoever was foolish enough to follow him. “Oh.” It’s not Quackity. It’s not even Ranboo. “Sorry, Phil.”

Phil raises an eyebrow at him, hands raised passively. “S’alright, mate. Sounds like you needed a shout.”

“Er, yeah,” Tubbo presses a hand to his forehead. There’s a headache there that seems to rarely go away. “What’s— What can I do for you, Phil?” *You’re still a president so why don’t you act like one.*

“I was just wondering if you’d... if you’d seen Ghostbur anywhere?” Phil asks is apologetically. They both know it’s because Tubbo is still waiting on a ghost who is never coming. Neither of them voice the thought aloud.

“No, I haven’t. Not for a while now,” Tubbo frowns. “Do you think he got lost or something? Or maybe hurt? Can ghosts even *get* hurt?”

“Well, I was just thinking since he burns in the rain, maybe he got caught in a storm somewhere? Or got lost, that sounds like him too,” Phil looks almost as tired as Tubbo feels.

Tubbo is suddenly struck by the realization that Philza might be the only one who could understand. He had killed someone he loved too.

Phil had known this fact. It hadn’t left him alone since the day he heard about Tommy’s death. He looks Tubbo over. His suit doesn’t fit. That’s *Wil’s* old suit. Of course it doesn’t fit him. “You... you doing alright there, Tubbo? Considering...”

Tubbo shrugs, returning to the wooden chair he’d dragged into the apiary weeks ago. There’s another across from him. Ranboo sits with him sometimes. Now he nods Phil over, inviting him to join him. Phil hesitates for a moment, before sitting beside him.

“I dunno if it’s gonna get easier for me, but I have to wonder, do you think it’s ever gonna get easier for you?” Tubbo stares at the bees, drifting from flower to flower. He wishes the hum could fill up the hole in his chest. “With Ghostbur being around, I mean.”

Phil sighs heavily. “I don’t know about that one. Ghostbur... He’s not really *Wil*, is he? Sometimes he almost reminds me of Wil when he was younger, but even then... Ghostbur doesn’t have that same... ah, *curiosity*. Wilbur used to knock shit over just to see if it would fall. So, Ghostbur doesn’t really feel like Wilbur still walking around, but...” Phil trails off. Is he really going to vent about his guilt to a teenager? He glances over to Tubbo, who stares back with solemn eyes from a scarred face. Tubbo isn’t really like other kids, he supposes. “Guess I feel like I owe Ghostbur something. It’s not a good thing, maybe. But I can’t let go of him. Especially not when he reaches out to me. Even if he’s been... fuckin’ missing for weeks...”

Tubbo nods, his own thoughts stirring slowly. He doesn’t share them. He stands. “I’ll help you go look for him. Maybe he’s just wandered too far from the prime path.”

Phil stands to follow. He’d noticed Tubbo’s lack of reciprocation when it came to emotional vulnerability. “Look, I’m sorry if me... talking about Ghostbur... that wasn’t fair to you. I know it’s— I can imagine...” Phil sighs wearily again. He doesn’t know how to do this. He’s good at survival, at fighting and strategy and wandering through the wilderness alone for months at a time. He’s not good at helping people deal with grief. You’d think after all this time outliving people he’d be a pro at it by now...

“It’s alright, Phil,” Tubbo shrugs. “I just... don’t have much to say on the matter right now.” A perfect politician’s answer.

Phil isn't having any of it. "If you want to talk about it, I'm around. And I know Ranboo will want to listen too."

"Thanks," Tubbo manages a smile. "I'd rather just look for Ghostbur right now. Take my mind off things."

When Phil and Tubbo return to L'Manberg, Ghostbur is standing dazed in the cliffside, far too close to where his counterpart had met his end on Phil's sword.

"Ghostbur! We've been looking for you," Phil almost moves to hug him before stopping himself.

Ghostbur blinks, frowning like he's lost his train of thought. "Oh, hi, Phil!" It's like he wakes up, back to his cheerful self, staring at the two of them with pale, naive eyes. "Hi Tubbo! You were looking for me? Why's that?"

"Because you've been gone for weeks," Tubbo looks at him curiously. "Where've you been?"

"Somewhere..." Ghostbur wanders the edge of the cliff without fear of falling. "Hmmm I don't remember it very well, so I think it was somewhere not nice."

"Not nice? What'd you mean?" Phil reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, if only for his own peace of mind. Something that wears his son's face dancing too close to a ledge unsettles him.

"That's the not remembering part, silly! I don't know," Ghostbur teases him. He doesn't pull away from Phil, but he doesn't reciprocate or reach out to him like Wilbur might have. "But I'm not there anymore! You said I was gone for weeks?" Ghostbur seems unbothered by this fact. "I must've left potions brewing! I should go see."

Before either living parties could reply, Ghostbur drifts off towards the sewers.

Tubbo watches him leave. "He was being awfully avoidant. Even for Ghostbur."

Phil shrugs. "That's just Ghostbur, right? He probably really doesn't remember, but if he thinks it was bad, he won't want to talk about it either, you know? Probably thinks it's easier to just ignore it." Phil looks at Tubbo pointedly.

"Probably," Tubbo replies coolly. "I'm gonna go visit Tommy. I haven't seen him yet today."

Philza softens, easygoing judgement exchanged for gentle concern. "Alright, mate. Do you want company?"

"No, no I'll be fine."

"I'll see you later, then."

“Later,” Tubbo gives him an affirming nod before heading in the direction of a familiar bench and a headstone growing more familiar by the day.

Tubbo stops a few feet from the grave. The sunflowers had been wilting, before disappearing not long after. Tubbo wonders if someone out there thinks they’re keeping the grave clean. He’s too weary to feel angry about it anymore. He just replaces the flowers. Dandelions this time. They were already growing on the hillside.

“I don’t know what’d be left of you if you came back as a ghost. If you did, I mean, realistically I’d never let you go, but right now... I hate the idea.” It feels easy to confess to such a thing to Tommy. He hasn’t talked about his feelings with Phil or Ranboo or Quackity or anyone, just Tommy. “Really I’d just rather have all of you.”

## Chapter End Notes

Wilbur Soot is here to save the dayyy... ha.

There are still puzzle pieces falling into place, but slowly but surely this will unravel ;)

As always, feedback is cherished <3 I loved hearing your thoughts and theories on the last chapter!



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

STRONG themes of unreality in this one!! It gets a little unnerving. Which is the norm for this fic, but be cautioned, psychological horror abound.

ALSO: at some point you're gonna want to listen to [this on youtube](#) or listen to it [on spotify!](#) Or wherever else. It's "Otherside" by Lena Raine.

You'll know when you're supposed to listen to it ;D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy can't find his brother.

It's been days— it's been *more than* days, and still Wilbur never comes out of the dark. Tommy isn't scared, though. He's fallen like this before. He's been alone before. That week locked in the cell was way worse than this. It hasn't been that long.

He *isn't* scared.

Tommy isn't weak, either. It's harder to distract himself from falling without someone to talk to, or even look for. He's still trying, albeit more pessimistically. It's never taken him this long to find Wilbur before. He's still fairly confident finding people is based on wanting to be near them, at least wanting bad enough. This entire place seems manned by what he feels like he needs. Tommy needs Wilbur.

Right now, though, he needs a fucking *floor*. He's tired of falling into nothing. Tommy has set Wilbur aside, and instead his thoughts are a running mantra of *stop falling stop falling stop falling STOP FALLING STOP FALLING STOP FALLING*—

Tommy was never one to think ahead, although he wasn't exactly thinking very clearly after this much time alone, but this was an especially poor follow through. Tommy didn't really remember what jumping off that tower felt like, but he had a feeling hitting the ground felt something like this.

Tommy gasps. He knows his bones haven't shattered, particularly because he isn't sure if he even has tangible bones, but hitting the ground after falling for hours— days? Has it been days by now?— feels like getting torn apart again, just a lot faster this time.

The pain dulls with impossible speed before fading back to the usual pins and needles he's grown accustomed to. Tommy tries to catch his breath, ignoring the strangeness that breathing itself is a choice for him here. He closes his eyes for a moment before realizing it doesn't make a difference. He just sees the dark either way.

Tommy assumes he manifested somewhere to land the same way Wilbur got his deck of cards or Schlatt got his booze, just by wanting it bad enough. He doesn't know. Tommy struggles to sit up. He hadn't needed to resist any form of gravity in all the time since being here. To be fair he had never been in total freefall. He doesn't think he would've been able to talk to Wilbur if that had been true, much too disorienting, but it had been like sinking through water, a slow fall underneath the very fabric of reality, strange as it sounds.

Who is he kidding. *Everything* about this place would sound strange.

If there were anyone he could tell about it.

The floor beneath him is perfectly smooth. It's even visible. He sits up and stares down at the ground ahead of him. It's still just black, but it's tangible as something other than empty air, no change in color or shadow or depth, but it's solid. It's not an extension into the dark. There's no light source... anywhere, but Tommy can still see. Before, with Wilbur, when there was a Wilbur, he could see Wilbur clearly, like the light wherever he was carried over to whatever image of him Tommy could make out. Same with the deck of cards.

This doesn't change the way the dark just keeps going. There's nothing.

"Wilbur?" Tommy shouts halfheartedly into the black. He almost wishes his voice would echo. That would mean this place had walls, had an end that might reply to him. There's nothing. There's no end, there are no walls closing in, so why does he feel like he's suffocating? "Wilbur!" Tommy screams into the dark, wishing for an echo, wishing for any reply he might cling to. Tommy can only hear his own frantic breathing. Tommy staggers to his feet on shaky legs, staring into the dark like somehow after all this time searching for him, somehow *now* Wilbur will appear.

"...Anyone?"

He hates how small he sounds. He doesn't want to sound scared here. This is the only place he's free of Dream, and scary as it is, he *needs* that to mean something.

His panic only rises. What had he expected? This is not peace, it's limbo.

"WILBUR!" Tommy cups his hands around his mouth, screaming like his life depends on it. If he had a life. "*WILBUR PLEASE WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?!*" Tommy is going to start tearing his hair out if someone— *anyone* doesn't just fucking answer him. It's been days now. Maybe even weeks. He doesn't know. It all *blurs*, the most he could do is try and count the seconds, but he's not that far gone yet.

"HELLO?!" Tommy bellows into the darkness until his throat hurts.

Still no reply.

Tommy paces frantically, back and forth, maybe not even in the same direction, turning randomly, really he's just *wandering* through the empty space. Okay. Okay, so he clearly, *definitely* wants Wilbur, but he still can't find him.

Maybe it's not about what he wants, or what he *needs*— because fuck, he cannot stand being alone like this— and more about what he deserves. Maybe he doesn't deserve Wilbur. Maybe Wilbur needs to want to see him too, and he just doesn't.

Tommy collapses back to the floor, laying flat on his back, a sob rising in his throat. He's tired of being alone. He misses Dream—

He misses *Wilbur*. Not Dream, *Wilbur*.

Tommy doesn't know why he's trying not to cry. Who the fuck is left to be brave for? There is *no one* and nothing. Tommy feels weak. He feels powerless. He *hates* feeling powerless.

He knows for all intents and purposes, this is how he's felt for fucking months in the living world, but *here* he cannot find *anything* to cling to or follow. Alive, he's so occupied in the minutia of keeping Dream happy he forgets what it's like to hate everything, himself often included. Tommy has spent so much time trying to just survive, or at least to avoid physical pain, he hadn't noticed anything going on with how fucked in the head he is. He doesn't know when he started to hate himself. He doesn't know when he started to want Dream to be happy with him. All that matters is that both of those things are how he is now.

How he *was*.

At least here, he can try and let go of that pain. Or maybe just pretend to. Tommy wants this to end. It's like the whole universe has been laid to rest *except* for him. How the fuck can he be dead *and* still suicidal?

Tommy doesn't know how Schlatt sleeps away months. He wants to figure it out. He doesn't know how long Dream is planning on keeping him here, it already feels like it's been weeks. Wilbur seemed relatively sure of how many years he had remained trapped here, so Tommy hoped his own sense of time would stay accurate enough that it wouldn't blur into eternity.

*You won't be here for an eternity. Dream would never let you go that easy.*

*Then what's he fucking playing at?!*

There is cruelty beyond what even he can understand, in Dream killing him on a whim and keeping him dead so long without warning. No time to prepare or even a chance to understand. This is not just cruel, it's torture. Although that's nothing new.

Tommy curls in on himself. He's not *cold*. Not quite, and there isn't a draft either, but something about all this empty space around him makes him shiver either way. Tommy buries his face in his hands, stifling a wail that rises against his bidding, his chest aches, as he tries to bottle whimpering sobs. He can't stop it, here, out of control of everything, and he can't even stop himself from breaking down.

When Tommy wakes, he hopes he's slept away enough time that Dream will take him back soon. Actually, he'd been desperately praying he'd wake up back on that stone floor. Those

two words from Dream, *wake up*, enough to inspire terror, and he wants them desperately. *Any* words spoken to him right now would be a gift.

“Wilbur?” Tommy calls weakly into the dark. It feels just like a ritual now, no meaning behind it, just an attempt that still must be made if only to mark out some pattern in absolute nothing. Tommy stands, and no matter how miserable he is, at least there’s a floor to stand on.

Tommy wants to keep screaming. He wants to beg someone, *anyone* for help, but he’s known for a long time— a lot longer than this— that no one is coming to help him.

“Okay, okay, okay, what *can* you get? What the fuck— What might *help*?” Tommy resumes his pacing, erratically zigzagging through the dark. “It’s too *fucking dark!*” Tommy again shouts at the void as loud as he can. There is no echo. “T-There’s just— There’s just *nothing*, aye?!”

Tommy takes a deep breath. His hands are shaking. Tommy got himself a floor. He can surely get himself light as well. He shouldn’t strive too hard, he shouldn’t try and get like, a miniature *sun* or anything, but a torch.

Tommy can deserve a torch.

Tommy sits back on the floor, knees tucked into his chest, rocking slightly. He covers his face with his hands, pressing his palms against his eyes.

“A torch, a torch, a torch...” he mutters. He tries to remember what heat feels like, what an open flame does to his vision, the way looking away from a bright light leaves after images, the feeling of holding a wooden stave, heat reaching down and stinging the top of his fist if he accidentally held it too high. He *needs* a torch.

Tommy can almost feel the warmth in front of him. He *can* feel it.

“I fuckin’ did it,” Tommy laughs, opening his eyes only to be immediately blinded by the flame only a few feet away. “AH! Fuck—” Tommy stumbles back, covering his eyes. “Ow, ow, ow—”

Compared to other suffering in the living world, Tommy knows he’s being overdramatic. It’s nice to have enough sensory feeling to be able to complain about it. Tommy is more cautious this time, opening his eyes with a careful squint, looking right to the left of the torch instead of straight on.

“I got it,” Tommy says softly, hands gesturing emphatically into empty air. There’s no one for him to talk to, but he’s going to put on a good show for himself. “I fuckin’ *got it!*” Tommy punches the air, kicking his legs out with weak laughter.

It feels too small a thing to take solace in. It’s all he has. He’s going to hold onto it. Tommy tries to look the torch head on again, this time more carefully. It’s a flame. It looks like one, it feels warm. The torch itself standing up straight from the black floor, it reflects out in all directions, shining rings of light gleam and flicker off of what Tommy sees to be a floor of

polished obsidian. There's something so alive, almost holy beyond comprehension, about a single light refracting further than it should. It's beautiful. It's *eerie*. It's all Tommy can fixate on. He reaches out towards it.

"*FUCKING SHIT*—" Tommy yanks his arm back, swears continuing in excess as he shakes out his burnt hand. "The fuck did you think was gonna happen you fucking idiot—" He hisses. He looks down at his hand. There's no burn. The pain is gone just as quickly.

Tommy shouldn't feel gloomy at that, but the one change he might've been able to effect for himself doesn't mean anything nor last.

He can get things, though. That counts for something.

Tommy picks up the torch carefully, taking far too much comfort in the gentle *whoosh* of the flame swinging through the air. It's a sound other than his own cries, his own footsteps. Tommy starts walking, the torch ahead. The feeble illusion that there's something to explore here dies within hours. He keeps walking into the darkness, the torch ahead, shining on the floor and sometimes Tommy looks back just to see the way his shadow is outlined by the firelight glaring off the black floor.

He keeps walking and *nothing* comes. Nothing happens, nothing appears from the dark. The torch doesn't help him find Wilbur, no strange shadows or shapes emerge from the gloom, and somehow that's worse. It's not just that the others here are lurking just out of sight, there is simply absence.

"Fuck..." Tommy sighs. He wishes he felt tired. *Properly* tired, not just this bonedeep weariness refusing to relent. Tommy carefully places the torch down and it stands up straight effortlessly. Tommy sits beside it, reaching his hands out more carefully now, just to feel the warmth, to feel *anything*. Tommy curls up around the torch. He tries to sleep again.

He can't even tell how long he's been asleep by whether he wakes up sore or rested or anything else. The difference between sleep and a particularly long blink feels ridiculously small. There's no way to indicate the passage of time.

"One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand..." Tommy starts counting, staring at the torch. He gets to 833 one thousand before he gives up. He just wants somewhere to *go*. Anything to do.

Tommy sits up with a sigh, turning around, once more staring into the dark. He does a double take.

In the distance, in the *very* far off distance, he sees a light. It could be a candle a hundred meters away, or it could be a full on lighthouse a kilometer away. He doesn't know nor care, because right now his heart is beating in his throat, a frantic, desperate energy is spreading through his veins.

He takes off running.

Tommy thought nothing echoed here, but the sound of his bare feet hitting the ground feels like it rings around him. His thoughts race wildly, desperate hope wondering if maybe those lights are shining from a train platform, or some way to return to the overworld. A more worrying thought takes root, but he doesn't slow down a bit. An anxious little voice in the back of his head refuses to be silenced: *Don't go towards the light. What if you get there, and you can never live again? It's what they all say, right? Don't go into the light.*

Tommy buries it too easily: *I'm just ready for this to be over, man.*

Tommy tries to run faster, not caring when he trips over his own feet and stumbles, he just rights himself and keeps going, no longer looking down, *only* looking at the light. It must take hours, but eventually the light becomes clearer, it flickers, a flame. Tommy slows down, eyebrows furrowed, he skids to a halt, out of breath in one second and utterly at ease in the next. He hesitates, worrying if he looks away the light will disappear, but he has to know. He looks back over his shoulder, far off in the distance, he sees a pinprick of light, his own torch. He *thinks*.

He looks ahead again, and far closer he can see the other torch, maybe only a dozen meters out. He keeps running.

It's another torch. It's another *fucking* torch and there is nothing near it. Up until he got this close, Tommy had still had some naive hope that someone else would be sitting beside this torch waiting for him, just as he had sat by his own torch, trying to find something to hold onto.

Tommy looks up from the torch, straight ahead.

In the far off distance he sees another light.

His hope isn't as dead as him, not just yet.

"It's a trail... Maybe it's a trail, right?" Tommy mutters to himself. Maybe this is naive too. He's still going to find out.

He keeps running.

This *helps*, somehow. It's just running through blackness, it's just chasing a single, static thing, but he has *something* to move towards. He *needs* this to mean something. He needs a light at the end of the tunnel, maybe he just needs the tunnel. Anything to give him somewhere to go.

It's another torch. Time stays blurry, but Tommy thinks it must've taken hours more for him to get to this one. It's exactly the same as the last. He looks up expectantly, scared of what will happen when the trail stops. He looks back and in the far off distance he sees the old torch, he looks ahead and a new one waits.

He'll follow this road as long as he can.

Tommy doesn't get tired. He *does* get bored. Not that he's lost his drive to keep following, but days chasing a horizon of matchsticks is grating and eventually he sleeps. Maybe enough time will pass that he'll wake up alive again.

Tommy knows he should've given up on that notion by now. No one is pulling him out of this. He should assume this is the standard instead of waiting on Dream to rescue him. Tommy rests and resumes his task.

He doesn't want to think about how long it takes him to realize where this path leads, the time he wasted. Maybe it's been months, maybe it's been a hundred torches— he tried counting and stopped within the next twenty— but eventually he gets frustrated enough to knock a torch over, the sound of it clattering to the ground echoes. He's exhausted. He's gone nowhere and he's found nothing. He still looks ahead to the next torch. He's not going to cry again. He's frustrated and mentally exhausted, but he's got nothing better to do. He keeps running.

His veins run cold when hours later, he finds the next torch, knocked over and still burning. He stares in stunned, confused horror.

“No, no, *no no no*—” Tommy stumbles back, looking around for the next light. He's about to start running again when he pauses, grabbing the torch from the ground with fumbling hands and dragging the end of the wooden stand along the ground, trying to scratch a line in the obsidian. It doesn't scratch, Tommy is assuming it's impossible, like bedrock, but he does smear bits of wood and fallen ash in a line on the ground. Good enough.

He pushes on, maybe even more desperate than before. Hours pass, Tommy consumed by the echo of his own footsteps and that distant, flickering light. He's running like something is chasing him, and it almost feels like something is.

The next light is still on the ground.

Beside it there's a smear of charcoal.

Tommy hasn't been going *anywhere*. He can only run in a circle and a straight line all at once.

“Oh *fuck*— this can't— this can't— I don't *understand*—” Tommy stumbles back, tugging at his hair, chest heaving as he tries to breathe. “No no no this can't— I've got to—” Tommy turns around sharply, looking at the distant light behind him. He goes back to his own torch and stands it back up. It's too far away to really tell, but he thinks the light behind him flickers. Tommy keeps his eyes locked on the distant pinprick as he backs up. He steps to the side so his torch is directly in front of him. Tommy feels like his heart has stopped again when that distant light is blocked out.

Like someone is standing behind it, staring back at a distant light.

Horrible, dreadful pieces fall into place.

Tommy hadn't been following a path. And his footsteps didn't echo, he was hearing his own footsteps because he was *literally running behind himself*.

Tommy hadn't felt like he was being followed out of some misguided paranoia, he *had* been followed. Just like he'd been following something else.

"Hello?!" Tommy screams back, hands cupped around his mouth.

His own voice echoes in reply.

Tommy hasn't felt terror like this, maybe ever. All at once Tommy is finally not alone, and he's also utterly *entirely* alone.

He's the only one here.

"What the fuck, what the *fuck*—" Tommy gasps shakily, stumbling before sitting back. Out of the corner of his eye he can see the other torch, the distant one he would have kept chasing. He sharply looks away, staring only at the one in front of him. "I-I'm going fuckin' *insane*..."

Tommy glances to either side, at the torch before, and the torch a head. "We've gone insane, haven't we?" Tommy shouts into the dark, laughing almost hysterically at his own voice echoing in reply. Tommy falls back to the ground, arms spread out, staring straight up into the black.

He sleeps.

It feels easier somehow, like now he's cracked enough he can waste the eternity in a dreamless state. *Dreamlessness* has been one of the few benefits of this place.

Tommy wakes up and for a moment he forgets. He's spent so much time— it had to have been weeks at the very *least*— chasing nothing that absence feels like an open wound.

He could keep running.

That's a fucking joke.

He has a torch. It's sort of lost its allure.

Tommy isn't just weary anymore, he's fucking pissed off. Tommy deserved more than this.

"Come on, Tommy. Think a little bigger for a change," Tommy mutters. He closes his eyes again.

He dares to think of something that feels so long forbidden.

He thinks of a bench on the side of a cliff, he thinks of a jukebox, of Cat, of Mellohi.

Of Tubbo.



He deserves at least one of those things.

Tommy hears something clatter on the ground. He freezes for a moment, some frantic hope still persisting, thinking that sound means someone had to have moved something.

He opens his eyes.

There is no one, but there *is* a Jukebox, and that's almost as good.

“Ha! Holy shit!” Tommy feels no embarrassment when he throws his arms around the box and hugs it like an old friend. “Please please please *please* tell me there's– YES!” Tommy throws his fists in the air, when gleaming in the torchlight, a single disk sits on the obsidian floor, like it's waiting for him to pick it up.

This disc has a soft blue-green label in its center. He doesn't recognize the colors at all. Tommy frowns, for a moment he'd hoped it would be cat, but no, the sticker reads *otherside*.

“The fuck is this..?” Tommy is far from disappointed, he can't believe it actually worked. Surely he should've known better, he never would've gotten cat or mellohi, not if getting things is really about *deserve*.

Tommy puts the disc in with shaking hands, it clicks into place and Tommy sits beside the jukebox, leaning against it. The first notes come through, soft horns at first, gentle. Then there's joy.

Tommy feels tears dampen his cheeks, he leans back so he can even feel the sound vibrate through his chest, closing his eyes as the song, new and happy and *kind* somehow mends part of whatever is broken inside of him. Tommy feels something indescribable, it's not just joy, nor strength, nor a promise that he can and will push on through all of this, it's something beyond even that.

For the first time in however many months, Tommy feels *loved*. Even if only by himself.

Eventually the disc stops. Tommy doesn't move at first, he stays there, hearing the music echo over and over and die out, as he hears himself hear the last notes over and over until it's too distant to hear. He wants to savor it. Even if he plays it again– which he definitely will– it won't ever be the same as that first go of it. It's the most alive he could feel in a place like this. He's still crying. He doesn't care, not when he can still feel those last gentle notes dying in his chest.

*Otherside.*

Fitting.

I've had this idea for horror for so long I have been absolutely buzzing about it! Life has been busy, so thank you all for being patient, I know I'm not posting as often as I did at the start, but I'm making it work!

Thanks for reading, and as always feedback is cherished <3

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

!!! TW: Bugs, rot, teeth, descriptions of injury, severe panic attacks, more along the lines of an all out mental breakdown, self harm, basically, last chapter was psychological horror, this chapter is more physical horror. These descriptions are written to be horrifying, so please be aware that I won't go easy on the details. Tommy's return is not a graceful one.

\*Because of its graphic nature, I'll also include a chapter summary in the end notes if you want to skip this one altogether!

I also took hearty inspiration from In a Week by Hozier, so. (Thank you GayFae420 for the very fitting song rec!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur would never admit it, but Dream was right. He had forgotten how much living hurt. Dream keeps him alive, but only just. Wilbur had been free of thirst and hunger and exhaustion for a decade, the very same with soreness or tension. The only thing familiar about being unable to move from the floor of this cell is the boredom. Wilbur might've thought he'd be numb to it by now, but that's because his limbo has become... arguably habitable. At least there he has his deck of cards, he occasionally has a pathetic drunk or a charming stranger for company. He can't really call MD a *stranger* anymore, though. He's fifty percent of everyone Wilbur knows there, omitting visits from Tommy.

Wilbur is suspicious of Dream's lack of visiting. He'd imagined Dream would take this opportunity for a powertrip on the regular. Dream had treated him as a puppet before, but now surely even *more* he has Wilbur at his mercy. Wilbur takes no comfort in the man's silence. He's probably not desperate for a powertrip because he gets to control Tommy all the time.

Oh god, *Tommy*. It's been days, surely. It's been *months* for Tommy. Wilbur's boredom is accompanied by rage. He's *useless*. He knows that hell all too well and Tommy is *alone* in it.

Wilbur sits up sharply, the action immediately making his head spin, as he hears the click of redstone, muffled through the wall. Wilbur is so thirsty. He hopes Dream might give him water again. It feels like he's been in the cell for a while, maybe a week? It's strange how he felt some level of understanding of time passing in limbo, but he hasn't had time to adjust to the way time makes itself known here. His body hurts. His thirst gets worse. He can only guess at how long it takes for things to get this bad. Wilbur leans back against the wall as the final sheet of obsidian slides back, revealing that vile masked figure once more.

“How’re you holding up, Wilbur?” Dream asks, cool and composed.

“Oh, just dandy, Dream. Really running a five star establishment here,” Wilbur’s sarcasm falls flat from a weak and hoarse voice.

Dream still lets out an amused huff. “Always good to hear.” He pauses, considering something. “It took Ghostbur a few days to show up, from after you died. Tommy’s ghost still hasn’t shown up yet. Why?”

Wilbur scoffs loudly. “How would I fucking know? You think I know jack shit about ghosts from limbo? Think I’m an *expert on being dead*, huh?” Wilbur wishes he could be more vicious. “Fuck you,” he adds for good measure.

Dream tuts him quietly. “I told you to watch that mouth of yours. It won’t just hurt you, you know.”

Wilbur debates it in his head. If Tommy has been dead all this time, he’s already hurting. What pathetic suffering can Dream give compared to being alone in that void for months? It’s like Tommy said, though. Wilbur didn’t know what Tommy had been surviving out here. He can’t gamble Tommy’s safety any more than he already has. Wilbur doesn’t want to make things any worse, hate it as he might, Wilbur has done enough to make Tommy’s life harder.

“I don’t know why ghosts appear or don’t appear,” Wilbur sighs instead, leaning his head back against the obsidian. His wrists ache every time he moves. His whole body hurts, merely not moving at all for this long is torturous in its own right. “Maybe it has to do with... with choosing to die, or something? But no, that doesn’t make sense, Tommy killed himself too.”

“Hm,” Dream sits on the floor across from him, taking a journal out and flipping through the pages. “I thought it might have to do with time spent dead, but that doesn’t make sense either. Even before now, Tommy was dead for like a week and no ghost showed up. Maybe it has to do with unfinished business. Did *you* have unfinished business?”

Wilbur laughs dryly. “No, I wouldn’t say I did. The *unfinished symphony* line was sort of tongue and cheek. The *point* was for it to be unfinished.”

“Well, what about outside of that? You left Tommy behind. Ghostbur, he came back and helped him and Tubbo rebuild L’Manberg. Was that something unfinished?” Dream asks, quill in hand.

“I... I dunno,” Wilbur frowns, staring up at the redstone lamp above. “I knew it was gonna hurt them. It was supposed to be a clean break—”

Wilbur comes back to himself, waking up with irritated contempt. “Why the *fuck* am I talking about this with *you*? You don’t deserve to know fuck all from me. So, do what you came here for and fuck off.”

Dream sighs, not even bothering to scold him or make threats. “That’s a shame, Wilbur. We were almost talking like we used to. Remember that? Team chaos?”

Wilbur scoffs, staring at the floor bitterly. He doesn't want to engage with any of this shit anymore. He's pissed off at himself for treating this like some project he and Dream are in on together.

Dream stands. "Fine, fine. I see you're done now. Don't worry, I'll be done with you too, soon. I'm gonna put this back," he holds up the cloth he had gagged him with before. "If you bite me, Wilbur. I will rip out one of your teeth."

Wilbur just stares, giving no indication of understanding or obedience. Dream takes his silence as enough. He makes the mistake of proceeding.

"*Fuck!*" Dream's hand bleeds and Wilbur does not let go, sinking his teeth into the soft skin below his thumb. Wilbur tries not to gag at the taste of blood, it's worse than just Dream's, it feels like he's tasting rotten meat. He has a fleeting thought of Tommy. "I'll fucking make you wish you were dead!" Dream snarls through his panic, hitting Wilbur over the head with the blunt of his axe.

Wilbur collapses to the floor, dazed, blood dripping from his forehead— and his mouth— and utterly victorious.

"You're gonna kill me once Tommy's back anyway, aren't you?" Wilbur spits blood with a laugh, haughty and unafraid.

"And I can still hurt you before then!" Dream holds his injured hand close. "I'll be back with fucking *pliers*, but don't expect this to be quick." He storms off, likely to heal his hand as well. He leaves the doorway to the cell open.

Wilbur doesn't try to stand. Even if his ankles weren't tied together, how far is he hoping to get? Would he really try running? Leaving Tommy behind? What a joke. Wilbur laughs under his breath, laying back and staring up at the dull glow of the redstone lamp, thinking about the way Dream had squirmed to get away like a flighty little kid who had put his hand too close to a wild dog. He knows Dream will be good to his word. Worth it, though. Wilbur hadn't expected to have a body again at all, what's a few teeth?

~

Returning to life after nine months in the dark is an act of violence. His mortal body protests the return of his soul without mercy. Tommy returns to himself, to his blood, his bones, his skin, and finds it not ready for his occupation.

Tommy feels something almost like the pins and needles of being pulled apart, but it feels more *alive* than that, but it's not his life. Tommy feels himself desperately trying to inhale, he feels the sharp pain of his ribs cracking as they expand. Tommy cannot open his eyes. He *cannot* open his eyes, because then all this will be real—

No, it's worse than that, he *really* cannot open his eyes. It's like they're sealed shut, but he *feels* something, there's something wrong with his skin, he keeps trying to see what it is, just as he's *still* trying feebly to inhale, but it's like there's a weight crushing down on him. It feels like everything about him is struggling to come back to life, blood fighting to pump

through his veins, muscles attempting to contract, lungs rattling with every weak expansion. He still cannot open his eyes, he's considering tearing his eyelids off, his jaw struggles to crack open and even if he could he doubted he'd have the strength to scream, his tongue feels thick and dry in his mouth. He feels trapped— he's gone blind, surely he's gone blind— and there's something wrong with him, there's something wrong with his skin, there's something *moving* on him—

Tommy opens his eyes and it feels like he's tearing open a wound, he jolts up, joints protesting harshly, and vomits onto the already bloodstained floor. The sight of the old rot and dead insects he chokes up almost makes him faint, he's shaken out of it by the perhaps worse horror of realizing he's covered in *maggots*, some still alive and writhing and falling off of him. His vision is blurred and his eyes *hurt*, they sting and feel both watery and dry— no, they feel *slimy*, his eyelids keep trying to stick together as he blinks, trying to make out *anything* besides the vile sensation of *things* crawling over him.

He gags again, but with nothing left to give, his hands are stiff, his fingers ache, but he still tries to get the fucking parasites *off* of him. His skin doesn't hurt, but he feels faint scars from old sores healed over, new scars among far too many. And the smell— oh god, the *smell*— like a zombie had been cut open on the floor. His ears feel full of water. He fucking *prays* it's water, that nothing else will come crawling out. Tommy sways dangerously, the scent of rot overpowering, there are no open wounds but it hurts all the same. His entire being protests his return. He's not supposed to be here. He doesn't know if he can keep his sanity back in the dark, but this is *too much*.

He can't take it anymore. Dragged back to his mortal body for maybe a minute, and Tommy blacks out.

Tommy comes to somewhere else, here the scent of rot is far less repugnant. Tommy is freezing and soaking wet, but at least that seems to have washed away the last of the maggots.

Tommy is breathing more easily now. He doesn't understand why he's back. He doesn't understand *anything* anymore. He had not made his peace with the dark.

It had taken months for him to feel truly insane.

Tommy had snapped and destroyed everything, he'd used the torch to smash the jukebox, he'd shattered the disc, he'd thrown the torch away. He tried to go numb to the dark for months more.

Before finally he pleaded to have them returned to him.

It had taken weeks more for him to get them back, to truly feel like he deserved them after breaking everything he touched.

The cycle would only repeat within a few months more.

Tommy hadn't had the disc last he'd been there, not for weeks. He could still hear the notes in the back of his head, but that only made the silence of his reality more grating. He cannot

even focus on his memories, not while he's being torn apart again by the incomprehensible horror of being alive.

"Tommy? Tommy, you with me again?" Dream's voice is the first he's heard besides his own in months. He had seen MD and even Schlatt a few times, but Schlatt had no tolerance for him and MD, he tried. He really did. He couldn't stay with Tommy all the time and within hours had been anxious to get back to his girl. That had been *so* many months ago, and many more alone.

"Come on, Tommy. Come on back to me," Dream slaps his cheek lightly, forcing Tommy to open his eyes, dazed and overwhelmed.

Tommy feels like words get caught in his throat. He cannot bring himself to speak, only stare blankly at the ceiling far above. Dream had moved him back to the main chamber. Tommy remembers this room. This room has a nether portal in it. Tommy notes this dully, without making any effort to stand or even look around.

"Sit up, I've got you," Dream takes his arm, dragging him off the floor. "Rough awakening, huh?" He says it with patronizing pity. "You're back now. It's gonna be okay. How do you feel? Do you want food, water?"

Tommy tries to focus on anything. His clothes are torn and bloodstained, his skin horribly pale— he can't have always been that pale, surely— there's dirt and blood smeared and diluted by the water he assumed Dream had dumped on him.

"*Tommy*," Dream snaps his fingers in front of Tommy's face, making him flinch violently. "You still with me? You're alive again. It's okay. You're not hurt."

Tommy forgot to breathe. He takes a deep, gasping inhale. Dream seems to assume this means he's ready to talk.

"Alright, good, how do you feel? Do you know where you are?" Dream keeps an arm around his shoulder to stop him from collapsing, kneeling beside him. Tommy does *not* want to be touched right now, but he's too weak to even try and pull away.

Tommy knows he's expected to reply. He's staring off into space, unable to focus, feeling like something is fighting against his body, like he's diseased, or rather, he *is* the disease.

"Come on, Tommy, catch your breath. Do you know where you are? Just nod, yes or no."

Tommy manages a nod.

"Good! Good," Dream pats his arm, like he's trying to soothe him. "Can you... Can you talk? Is your voice messed up again?"

Tommy shrugs, trembling hands covering his face as he curls into a ball, anything to block out the light. It's all too much.

"Hey, if you answer my questions, I'll... I'll give you food, okay?" Dream is treading cautiously. That's how Tommy knows he's definitely broken if Dream is treating him with

some level of delicacy. “Or if you *don’t* answer, I won’t feed you for days. How about that?” Never mind. That felt much more on brand.

Tommy still doesn’t respond. He’s biting down on his knuckles, trying to give himself some pain to focus on, just as he did in desperate hours in limbo. Tommy feels fresh, hot blood trailing down his arm and he only bites down on his hand harder. He isn’t supposed to *bleed*.

“What the fuck— Tommy, stop!” Dream seems startled by the sight, slapping Tommy’s hand away. After he does so, he almost wishes he hadn’t stopped him. Felt almost fitting for Tommy to give himself the same wound Wilbur had given him. Different priorities. “Can you— Will you just answer me?!”

Tommy doesn’t stop. He tugs on fistfulls of his hair until it hurts, his eyes shut tightly, teeth gritted, waiting for *all* of this to stop.

“I said *answer me*,” Dream tries another method, hitting Tommy over the head. Tommy is so tense it probably hurt Dream as much as it hurt him. Tommy doesn’t react beyond hunching his shoulders deeper inward, head ducked down, Tommy digging his nails into his temple, holding on like he’s trying to crush his own skull.

“Fucking hell...” Dream stands up, stepping away from him, utterly dumbfounded. “Did I fucking break him..?” Dream mutters, under the assumption that Tommy definitely isn’t coherent enough to understand him.

“Okay... okay, desperate measures,” Dream sighs, crouching down in front of Tommy and firmly taking his wrists, his arms remain rigid and resist Dream’s efforts. He wonders for a moment if rigor mortis doesn’t go away easily. Tommy’s eyes are still closed tightly. “Hey, Tommy, look at me.” No response. Dream wants to start yelling at him again. He holds back. “Tommy... if you calm down and answer my questions, I’ll... I’ll play a disc for you. How about that? You like... you had *far*, right? In Logstedshire?”

Tommy remains tense, but he’s looking at Dream now, and there is something unnervingly human in that gaze, a *hunger* that makes Dream all the more concerned that he’s lost a sane Tommy for good.

“Good? You *have* to answer me first, okay?” Dream’s anxiety dies and he returns to that scolding, authoritative tone.

Tommy nods.

“Okay, okay good,” Dream tries to get his footing again. *He* is in charge here. No matter how much of a brat limbo made him, he will still obey Dream. *He* knows how to control Tommy. He lets go of Tommy’s wrists, relieved when Tommy doesn’t start fighting again. “Do you know where you are?” He repeats it. Tommy nods. “Good. How do you feel?”

This one cannot be answered with a nod. Tommy hesitates.

“Wrong... ‘s all wrong...” Tommy mutters, hands balling into fists before releasing. His whole body feels stiff.



“Wrong how?” Dream sits across from him, notes once more in hand.

“Too much... Everything is...” Tommy wants this to be over. He wants a disc more.

“Are you physically in pain right now?” Dream asks more forcefully.

“I... I dunno... I *don't know*,” Tommy looks frantic, like he might start freaking out again.

“Okay, okay, that’s okay,” Dream is quick to reassure him. “How’s your vision? Can you see me clearly?”

Tommy glances back up to him in muted confusion. “Y-Yeah? I... I think so? W-Why wouldn’t I...?” This is so fucking surreal. Tommy is having a *conversation* with someone, sitting on a tangible floor. He has to breathe. He has a body. Not once in all that time had he seen Wil.

“It’s nothing,” Dream waves him off. “You’re gonna stay calm, right?” He asks more pointedly.

“I... I dunno, I think I... I d-don’t fuckin’ *know*, man,” Tommy’s voice grows hoarse and high, his heart beating faster.

Dream sighs. “Okay. Come on then. We’ll... listen to your disc, I guess. And then I’ll take you back to your room, give you some time to rest, but when I come back to get you after that, I’ll still have questions that I expect you to answer, got it?”

Tommy manages a nod. Dream offers him a hand, Tommy barely reaching out to accept before Dream drags him to his feet. Tommy is glad he managed to get a floor. So many months falling, he doesn’t think he would’ve been able to stand after all that.

Dream walks him towards his library, Tommy stumbling behind, only moving because Dream still holds onto his wrist. Dream glances at the wall of books like he’s looking for something. He turns away, going to the nearer wall, looking for something.

Tommy stares, fixated at something on the edge of Dream’s worktable. A single bloody tooth next to equally bloody pliers. Tommy doesn’t move, he doesn’t even blink, staring at them as he reaches a trembling hand up to his own mouth, looking for a missing tooth. No, they’re all there— he’s pretty sure— so...

“Right,” Dream interrupts those thoughts, disc in hand. “One listen, okay, Tommy?”

Tommy is still looking at the tooth. He nods.

Dream catches on, grabbing the tooth and pliers and putting them in his inventory. “Don’t you worry about that, Tommy. Nothing to do with you.”

Dream has a jukebox in the far corner, a new development. Tommy would’ve remembered a jukebox. Tommy is unsettled by all of this for reasons beyond living. He can’t think of a time Dream has given him *positive* reinforcement. Further evidence that Tommy must have really gone over some precipice. He must be insane.

None of that dread matters, not when the disc starts playing.

Tommy sits on the ground, pressing his back against the jukebox so he can feel the sound rumbling through his chest. If Tommy closes his eyes, if he makes it darker, it almost feels stable. He cannot miss being dead. He can't say he *does*, but being alive is terrifying. At least the void had become familiar. Dream remains leaning against the wall, impatient, but he doesn't talk, he doesn't interrupt, and for that Tommy is grateful. This disc, it's not *otherside*, but maybe it being something older makes it more precious. He knows he'll never be able to listen to that disc alive. He missed living discs too.

The music dies off and Tommy feels like a weight is pressing down on his chest, he feels panicked, getting up and turning to put the disc back in.

"Ah, no, Tommy. You don't get to touch that," Dream scolds him, holding him back with a hand pressed to his chest as he retrieves the disc himself.

"N-No," Tommy says hoarsely. "P-Play it again."

"No, Tommy. I said I'd play it for you *once*." He's so patronizing. "You definitely haven't earned anything more, I mean, I'd say you didn't even earn *that*—"

Tommy shoves Dream's hand aside, reaching for the disc. "Y-You gotta play it again."

"*Tommy*," Dream continues more sharply, shoving him back so he hits the bookshelves. Dream seems to quickly reconsider something, grabbing onto the scruff of Tommy's shirt and pulling him away from there. "You don't act out like that, you know better."

"No, j-just one more time, have to—" Tommy isn't even looking at him, just staring at the disc still in Dream's left hand. "You *have* to!" Tommy keeps pulling against him, reaching for the disc.

Dream actually laughs. "Holy shit, you're like an addict!" He seems more fascinated than alarmed. "Did you have a disc in limbo?"

Tommy doesn't answer. "*Give it to me! Fucking give me the disc!*" Tommy is screaming in an instant, clawing at Dream's chest, trying to lunge past him to where he's holding the disc behind him.

"Stop it right now, Tommy, or I'll break it," Dream grows less amused, voice cold and sharp, normally a warning Tommy would heed, but not now. Dream keeps holding onto Tommy by the collar of his shirt, but it doesn't deter him.

"*But you have to! You have to play it!*" Tommy feels a sob rising in his throat. He *needs* this.

He needs the disc like he needed Wilbur for all those months.

"I told you to *stop*," Dream throws the disc behind him. It hits the stone wall and shatters, a bloodless death, but Tommy screams like he's dying instead.

*"No! No you can't!"* Tommy falls to his knees. "You can't! No no no no no no no— I need it! I-I deserve this! Bring it back!" Tommy gathers the shards of vinyl in his fists, not caring about the blood drawn. The shards remain broken and the room silent except for his sobs. Tommy collapses, the room feels distorted around him as he curls into a ball, his head pounds. *"I need it back I need it back I need it back—"*

Dream doesn't try to stop him. "Fine, have your fucking tantrum—" That is, until he realizes what Tommy is trying next. "Fucking *stop!*" Dream grabs him just before he can slam his head into the floor again. Tommy writhes like a wild animal, thrashing and trying to get out of his hold, landing a good blow against Dream's mask.

*"BRING IT BACK!"* Tommy is still screaming, blood dripping from his forehead and into his eyes alongside furious tears.

Dream holds on tighter, wrapping him in a bear hug to stop him from bashing his head in. Dream has never been panicked by Tommy, not like this. He stays there, holding on tightly until Tommy stops fighting so viciously, but he's still sobbing like Dream has killed him. Well, he's sobbing *worse* than if Dream had killed him.

Dream is having some regrets. If this is how Tommy is going to be from now on, that ruins the game. He can't have broken him, not completely. *Wilbur* came back sort of normal.

*"I'm worried he'll come back wrong."*

*"You came back normal."*

*"I mean, did I?"*

Shit. If Wilbur Soot is right, Dream is going to be fucking pissed. Maybe he'll use Wilbur instead for a change. He won't give up on Tommy just yet. Dream keeps one arm around Tommy's chest, he's skinny enough by now that's easy, all but carrying him out of the library.

He does not go across the hall to Tommy's usual room. He turns left and descends a few steps to a dark cell of obsidian. Tommy doesn't protest beyond a whine of panic, struggling weakly against Dream's hold on him.

"Hey, it's gonna be okay, Tommy. You just gotta *calm down*," Dream drops him on the ground, Tommy curls in on himself again, his nails digging into his arms as he holds himself. This room still has Tommy's dried blood on it from him tearing apart his fingernails clawing to get out. "I'll check on you in a few hours. I *highly* suggest you don't try to kill yourself. I'll just bring you back again, and I won't be as forgiving towards this behavior as I was last time, got it?"

With that, the obsidian seals the room, and Tommy is alone in the dark.

Dream returns to his library, scoffing at the bloody pieces of the disc on the ground. "Overdramatic little brat..."

He goes to the back wall of the library where he had so carelessly shoved Tommy before, reaching for a lever carefully hidden. This had been his intended destination after he finished talking to Tommy anyway, even if it hadn't gone in any way according to plan. Dream can't help but reconsider his options as he heads down the narrow corridor before finally opening the cell door, the redstone lamp blinking to life on Wilbur Soot still alive on the floor.

Wilbur looks white as a sheet, eyes wide in panic, he's sitting up, and from the deep red burns in his wrists, he'd been fighting to get free viciously. The sight of Dream doesn't incite fear, more so urgency, Wilbur attempting to scream at him through the gag. Dream considers it for a moment. After *that* nightmare, Wilbur will be nothing but great company. He pulls away the gag.

Wilbur immediately spits blood that had built up behind the gag, grateful that this time he didn't have to swallow it as he had been for the past hours. His mouth aches horribly, and if Dream hadn't already been planning on killing him he might've been worried about the infection losing a tooth like that might cause. Wilbur has other priorities at present.

"What the fuck is going on?! He's back— Is he okay?! What did you fucking do to him?! I— I heard music, and then there was *screaming*, so much fucking screaming— So what the fuck did you do?!" Wilbur struggles against the ropes, but there's a surprisingly lack of aggression from him. Wilbur fights, but his tone is more pleading, he cares more about knowing what happened to Tommy than he does for futile efforts to punish Dream. He's still spitting blood and every word sends pain shooting through his skull.

"He's... alive," Dream begins slowly. "What was returning like? For you?"

Wilbur falls silent, his struggling slows. He laughs hoarsely, spraying blood. "It's not easy, is it?" He says dryly. That sardonic humor is exchanged for a softer dread. Wilbur hasn't been scared like this in a long time. "You... He was alone in there. For months, right? What do you think that'll do to a person— to a— a *kid*?"

Dream folds his arms over his chest, feeling oddly like a child being scolded. "You came back fine..."

Wilbur lets out a barking laugh, more blood spattering on the floor, "oh, did I?!"

"Just *tell me* or I won't do anything to help him," Dream is sharper now, defensive.

"Help him..?" Wilbur trails off, eyeing him carefully, but there's no expression to read behind a mask. He thinks on it for a moment, slouching back against the wall, his wrists still ache and sting from his efforts. He'd heard Tommy screaming, he'd never fought harder, but even if he hadn't been weak, he couldn't get through the ropes, let alone the obsidian wall. He'd been a captive audience, forced to listen to his little brother cry like he was in agony.

Wilbur recalls that agony well. The agony of a new body. The strangeness of being breakable again, of feeling the world around him, tangible and cruel. The shock of *pain* that didn't fade in moments.

He thinks of the early years dead. Of when he thought the isolation might kill him again, eviscerate his mind completely. The way he learned to wrap himself around a deck of cards, around feeble conversations with Schlatt and MD, the way that since being back, while he hates to admit it, the thing Wilbur had thought about the most hadn't been Tommy, nor any of the living he now existed in the same world as. Every thought, the running backtrack of his now living consciousness, had only been thinking of his deck of cards. Wilbur had been playing solitaire in his head like it's as second nature as breathing, maybe more natural to him now as breathing had been optional. The cards had not.

Wilbur thinks of what he heard, music, silence, screaming. He thinks he might understand. No epiphany here offers relief.

"You... you played a disc for him."

Dream bristles, "yeah, I did. Thought it would get him to calm down."

"Then you took it away."

"Of *course* I took it away, it was a *reward*. He didn't deserve to keep it!" Dream's hands are balled into fists now, growing more defensive. They still have some of Tommy's blood on them.

Wilbur wishes he could mock Dream's failure, feel smug and haughty that his own horror inconvenienced the man, and he probably would, if he didn't know Tommy was currently paying the price. Even in this tiny cell, Wilbur had felt like he was losing his mind, still overstimulated just by his own thirst. Wilbur doesn't consider himself sane, but a decade in limbo, it's like he got to move past that point of insanity back onto even ground. Tommy got dragged out in the thick of it. Wilbur remembers the early years far too vividly. The worst years.

Wilbur bites his lip, he knows his eyes are watering. He *hates* being helpless, and he *knows* how scared Tommy must be right now, how bad he's hurting, and he doesn't want to *think* about how Tommy must think he abandoned him, but somehow he can think of nothing else. He just wants to help Tommy. He will *not* fucking cry over this, he won't give Dream the satisfaction.

"You know," Dream sighs, pulling him from his darkening thoughts. "I came in here to kill you, but I'm thinking Tommy's probably gonna kill himself in the next few hours, so, gotta keep you here then."

Wilbur sits back up, desperate for news. The potential that Tommy might kill himself barely feels like a concern to Wilbur at this point, not compared to other suffering. "Where is he? How is he now?"

Dream considers him for a moment. "The where should mean nothing to you, first off, you're not going anywhere you fucking idiot, second off, uh. I'd say catatonic. Started trying to bash his fucking head in, so I put him back in his cell. Just 'til he calms down."

Wilbur wants to scream at the man, to rip his fucking face off, but he's so *tired*. It feels like a weight pressing down on his chest and tears are harder to resist now. "Y-You can't do that," he pleads softly. "He needs *help*, Dream. You can't just *leave* him in a fucking box!" Wilbur had learned to cope with being trapped over the past decade. It's those early years again, coming back to him dark and haunting. The early years, a room like this would've destroyed him even worse than he'd already destroyed himself. Tommy is meant to be outside, running, causing trouble, breathing fresh air, he *cannot* cope in a cell. Wilbur tries to cater to the monster he remains at the mercy of. "If you want him to be normal again or whatever, y-you've got to be fucking *careful* with him, you can't do this—"

"Actually, I can do whatever I want with him," Dream cuts him off, cool and unfeeling. "Just like I can do whatever I want with you."

Wilbur manages to set aside his fear for anger. "You're gonna be fucking dead one day, Dream! No one lives forever!" He sits up, leaning forward, wanting to rip the man apart with his teeth. "And I'll be fucking waiting, Dream! I'll think of you *every fucking day* so you're hand delivered to me, and then I will *disembowel* you, over and over and *over* again!"

Dream gets him away with a halfhearted kick. "Sure thing, Wilbur." Dream bends down and Wilbur lunges forward to headbutt him, but Dream grabs him by the hair, pinning him to the wall, Wilbur's vision flashes white from the impact, he grows dazed, but no less furious. Wilbur is still struggling hard, but it's nothing compared to Tommy. He manages to spit blood in Dream's face, aiming for his eyes, all it does is make Dream hold on tighter, careful to be sure Wilbur can't move this time. Dream returns the gag before throwing him to the floor, sealing the cell behind him before Wilbur can even sit up.

Wilbur doesn't bother. He stays on the ground, no longer with a reason to hide his tears, anger returns to anguish. He curls in on himself. His chest aches, sobs caught in his bloody throat. He doesn't know that he and Tommy lie parallel to one another, identical cells, both of them remain curled on the floor, mourning themselves or mourning the other.

## Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the horror, everyone. If it helps, I got upset writing it too <3

Also, to be clear, this story will get better in the relatively near future, I have so much planned out, this is just... the dark before the dawn. It's just a long night.

~

## CHAPTER SUMMARY:

Dream asks Wilbur about ghosts, trying to figure out why Tommy doesn't have one. Their theories include maybe Tommy doesn't have unfinished business or maybe because Tommy didn't choose to die, both of these theories feel useless. Wilbur becomes uncooperative so Dream leaves him.

Tommy is resurrected. Dream cannot get him to talk, so he bribes him by offering to play a disc. Tommy manages to answer a few questions. Dream plays 'far' for him, but once it ends Tommy freaks out to the point of an all out breakdown where he's trying to hurt himself. Dream stops him, fearing that Tommy has fully lost his mind, and puts him back in the dark cell.

Dream goes to kill Wilbur as he originally planned before reconsidering, because he thinks Tommy might kill himself. Wilbur pleads with Dream to know what happened to Tommy. Dream explains, because he wants Wilbur to explain why he seems relatively sane while Tommy freaked out so much. Wilbur is uncooperative, but he's thinking about his own early years in limbo, and how over the decade he adjusted to it and Tommy never had that chance and was still in the worst of it when Dream brought him back. Wilbur begs Dream to help Tommy in some way. Dream is uncaring about his concern for Tommy and leaves him there.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

TW: Mentions some stuff from the last chapter, but nothing graphic! Usual Dream being a dick, Tommy not coping. Y'know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's not too different from limbo.

Tommy finds the obsidian of the cell is just a little rougher than the polished floor of the void, but the dark is still there. He cannot even see himself, which breaks the illusion somewhat. Light, gravity, sound, all worked so simply here.

Regardless, Tommy calms within hours.

He'd been through all of this before. He'd listen to the disc, cling to it, consume it, devote himself to it, wrap his soul around it. He'd learn to hate it.

Hate it for being there for him more than Wilbur.

He'd destroy it, and those first hours after were always violent. Tommy would scream into the dark until his throat felt raw. He would beg for it to be returned to him, he'd beg to die. He never received anything then, not when he knew he didn't deserve any of it. Times like that got bad enough sometimes he would start falling again, getting torn apart again, not even deserving of ground to stand on.

Calm would return. Eventually, if enough time passed, days, weeks, he even would deserve to have the disc again.

He'd lose himself in it for weeks more, the hatred for it would begin to fester, and so on and on and on.

Tommy feels calm now, but first he had screamed, the room too small for an echo just as limbo had been too big, screaming with everything he had, covering his head with his hands, tugging on his own hair until the pain felt comparable to the desperate agony inside of him, screaming like he's trying to eject his soul from his body. In limbo he had never needed to stop, he could just keep going until he wore himself out, but now alive Tommy has to pause to inhale. That doesn't stop him from resuming his efforts immediately. There's no reason for it. In limbo he'd screamed just to feel something, to feel like he could project some part of his pain onto that uncaring plane. So he tries here too. He screams until he's exhausted, head pounding worse and his throat so raw it aches, then he just stays, curled on the floor, staring into the dark for hours more. A familiar task. All of his fear and rage is slowly being sapped out of him. It's cathartic, the familiarity of something he felt he needed being



destroyed. Normally by him, but Dream doing it still served the same purpose and came with its own twisted nostalgia. Dream wouldn't have broken it if Tommy had behaved. Of course, he'd *needed* to listen to it again. That had been unavoidable. All of this was unavoidable. Tommy hadn't been in control of himself for a long time.

When Dream eventually comes for him, Tommy covers his eyes. The faint light down the hall when the obsidian is removed breaks the illusion. He wants to stay in the dark. He's out of limbo, and he should feel relieved. At least he isn't alone anymore, but it all feels *fuzzy* around the edges. Unable to decide on whether being alive again is good or bad, he'd rather cling to the familiarity of the dark.

"Hey, Tommy," Dream crouches down beside him, almost gently pulling Tommy's hands away from his eyes. "Feel better?"

Tommy stares at that mask, smiling down on him. Dream is *real*. He's a breathing being talking to him, Tommy can't see it, but he knows there's a real face behind that mask. Tommy nods, still staring at Dream like he can somehow keep him if he looks long enough. Tommy is reaching for Dream, trembling hand outstretched, like he's something holy.

Dream, if he's surprised, doesn't show it. He takes Tommy's hand and helps him to his feet. "There we are, Tommy. All better, right?" Dream lets Tommy hold onto him, the boy too weak to do any harm even if he's got his scrawny little arms latched onto Dream's arm like it's a life raft. Dream thinks if Tommy lets go he'll probably collapse on the ground. He all but carries Tommy up the stairs, an easy task when Tommy has grown so thin, guiding him into the other cell. There are new flowers. Poppies in the vase by the sink.

Tommy stares around the cell more gloomily. There's a glowstone lamp. It's too bright in here.

"Do I have to stay here?" Tommy croaks out, his voice hoarse and just barely audible, hours screaming followed by hours silent making him weaker. It's a miracle he can speak at all.

"What do you mean, Tommy? You have nowhere else to go," Dream grows sharp in an instant, thinking that somehow Tommy has lost it enough that he's asking to leave him.

"No... the—" Tommy's voice breaks and he becomes inaudible. He swallows painfully and tries again. "The other one," Tommy looks back towards the corridor. He's still clinging to Dream's arm. Dream is warm, he's *alive*, so despite everything Tommy can't bring himself to let go. "It's darker. Can I stay there? Just for a few more hours?"

Dream is momentarily stunned to silence. He's itching to get his notebook out, to record whatever mental break his lab rat is currently going through. He'll have to try and get Tommy in working order first. "I'll... consider it. If you're good." He half pushes Tommy away, indicating he should let go. Tommy seems to only hold on tighter.

"Let go now, Tommy."

Dream is a little surprised when Tommy immediately listens, letting go like he was just waiting for the command. He heads towards the corner, but he doesn't sit on his bed, he sits

on the floor, knees tucked into his chest, staring up at Dream, just waiting, like he's not even alive until someone else engages with him. It's *eerie*. Dream still doesn't know what to make of it, he should be satisfied that Tommy is still obedient and dependent, but he's also just acting so fucking *weird*. Dream could almost understand Tommy screaming like he was being tortured while alone in the cell, loud enough Dream could actually faintly *hear it* from his library, to the point that Dream actually debated checking on him, because *something* had to be happening to him to make him scream like that. Screaming almost feels natural compared to this eerie calm, this is something else entirely. Dream almost misses the old brat.

"I want to get back to our experiments relatively soon, okay? But I get it if you need some time to recover, so we'll hold off for a bit," Dream watches Tommy carefully, looking for some indication of understanding.

Tommy keeps staring at him, expression unreadable, but he does give a nod.

"Good," Dream resists a shiver. Dream has a fleeting thought that maybe he brought back a more corporeal ghost of Tommy instead, but *Ghostbur* was never even this haunting. "So, uh. I got you clean clothes. And food. I'll be back late to talk more, okay?"

Another nod.

Dream backs up towards the doorway, still facing him, half expecting Tommy to try to stop him from leaving, but Tommy just watches him go with those horribly empty grey eyes, not reacting even as Dream puts down that sheet of lava between them. Dream... *sort of* thinks Tommy isn't a suicide risk anymore? He's so calm, but Dream almost thinks that makes him more unpredictable.

"What the fuck..." Dream sighs, rolling his shoulders back, trying to remove the tension. He isn't *scared* of Tommy, obviously. He could break him like a twig. There's just something so deeply *wrong* there. Wilbur had seemed a little off upon his return, but if Wilbur is unhinged, Tommy is uncanny.

Tommy stays on the floor at first. Part of him doesn't want to move. His head throbs painfully, but that's his own fault. He feels cold no longer clinging to Dream's side. There's a strip of lava radiating heat. He could move closer.

No. That's too much.

Tommy *is* motivated to get the blood and filth off of him. It's like a second skin, itching and unrelenting. His clothes once more stick to him, the fibers shredded and firm with dried gore. Tommy's skin looks almost dappled by scarring, occasional patches of pinker tissue from blisters and other damage post mortem. Tommy can only think of things burrowing under, or maybe crawling *out*. Tommy manages not to gag again, but the pain from his head is definitely contributing to the nausea, if he isn't concussed, he probably should be from all that. Tommy washes his face first. He doesn't have a mirror here and that's probably a good thing, but the rag gives him some idea. Tommy can't really remember how he died the last time, but he's guessing it was a head wound. His hair is matted with dried blood and it looks like it had pooled on the ground around the right side of his face. Although some of it is

fresh from Tommy hitting his head against the floor. Even Tommy's left eye comes away crusted red, like he'd been crying blood. Maybe dried blood had been why it'd been so hard to open his eyes. Some nagging voice tells Tommy it's worse than that. He doesn't linger on the thought.

Tommy had been a soldier once, but he'd seen surprisingly few corpses in his time. The freshly dead are different, just before a body disappears and the person respawns, they don't seem like a *corpse* yet. He had never seen the outcome of nature taking someone back. Schlatt's dismembering funeral had been the closest example, but that felt more like a butchering than true decay.

His skin is almost grey, the old blood so dark it almost looks black.

It takes hours for Tommy to get anything close to clean. He hadn't even looked at the food Dream had left him. Tommy hasn't eaten in nine months. He'll hold off a few more hours, even as the strangeness of hunger pangs return to him. Hunger had been the background of Tommy's reality pre-mortem, but nine months without makes even the old staples feel unfamiliar.

In limbo Tommy had been wearing what he died in, which wasn't great considering those clothes had already been bloodstained. The new ones are softer, not in material, but by virtue of not being stiff with blood. Tommy had felt so little softness these past months. Tommy wraps his arms around himself, the black jumper smells musty and old, Tommy *still* doesn't have shoes, but he'll take the socks gladly. Tommy feels *warm* again. He closes his eyes, resting his chin on his knees pulled close to his chest. He hasn't felt this comfortable in a long time. Limbo hadn't been *uncomfortable*, it had just been nothing. The pain had stopped when he stopped falling, and without pain, there was little else to feel. The vibrations of music playing through the jukebox had been the most sensory experience he had other than sight and sound.

Tommy dares a look at the mushroom soup Dream had left him with. He's thirsty too. He could manage to drink some of the soup, surely.

It's an awakening, one sip and Tommy *really* remembers what hunger is. Mushroom Henry doesn't even cross his mind as he downs the bowl. Food is *good*. Soft clothes are good. Warmth is good. Maybe even light is good.

Tommy doesn't feel quite so scared. If he refuses to let himself think about the broken disc, he doesn't feel like he's on the cusp of screaming anymore, his throat still hurts. Strange. He's used to pain being temporary.

The problem with not thinking about the disc is what it leaves behind. The only other thing he had to love or hate.

Wilbur.

He'd smothered every thought of his brother best he could in limbo, but back in the living world, finally no longer alone, and that hatred and love wells back up in a vibrant grief.

*“Bury it bury it bury it bury it–”* Tommy whispers it like a mantra, voice barely loud enough for him to even hear himself.

Tommy wants to start screaming again. He’s too tired. Maybe he should cry. It’s strange to think of all his potential outlets like choices rather than cruel compulsions, but right now Tommy toes the line between hysteria and serenity, even feeling *anything* seems like a choice to him now. So he chooses to stop missing his brother. It doesn’t work, of course. There’s an illusion of freeing himself from it at least.

“You’re not acting like yourself, are you..?” Tommy can barely speak, but he still mumbles under his breath, rocking slightly. “What’s that mean? What does that *mean*? Who am I, then? Am I anyone? Am I anyone? Am I?”

Tommy laughs, even as it hurts his throat. He’s tired. Not in soul, or not merely in soul, but in body too. He’s *exhausted*. It’s been so long since he’s felt this kind of exhaustion. Sleep greets him like an old friend, or not a friend, Tommy hasn’t had those for a long time, but sleep comes to him like a fellow captive, perhaps. That must be almost like a friend, surely. Or maybe captor. *Dream* said he was his friend, didn’t he? All that time ago?

Sleep is not like limbo. It’s easier.

Dream puts Wilbur down before he can even struggle. Killing has become so easy to him now, it’s almost second nature. He’s lost count of how many times he’s killed Tommy. Killing Wilbur is no different. The man tried to sit up, but surely he knew what was coming. This had always been the plan. Dream snaps his neck. Wilbur should be grateful it was so clean.

It helps that there’s no blood to wash off as he returns to his only living resident. Tommy looks better. Still waxy and pale and very corpselike, but he doesn’t look like a terrified wild animal in sleep.

“Wake up,” Dream nudges him with his boot.

Tommy startles awake with a gasp, scrambling back, stunned. He’d forgotten where he is, he hadn’t expected anything to wake him. There wasn’t *supposed* to be anything to wake him in the dark.

“Feel better?” Dream asks.

Tommy struggles to get his bearings, squinting in the soft light of the glowstone. He manages an unsteady nod.

“Good. Come on,” Dream nods in the direction of the corridor. Tommy struggles to stand, but when he does he stumbles to catch up so he walks directly behind Dream, hesitating like he wants to step closer. Dream is torn between feeling smug and disconcerted. Tommy still seems to have a healthy level of fear, so Dream will do his best to ignore it for now, and exploit that weakness as needed.

“Now what?” Tommy lacks some of his usual dread. Dream thinks he must be imagining it, but it almost sounds like *curiosity*.

“I’ve got some more questions for you, about the past week or so. Months in your case, I guess,” Dream proceeds to the library, going to his worktable, old tomes stolen from the long dead— or more recently dead, depending on Dream’s ease with the previous owner giving it up— lay open and notes scribbled in the margins.

“...Questions?” There’s that familiar suspicious anxiety now. Tommy stares at the corner where the jukebox had been previously. It’s gone. Along with all evidence of the disc.

Tommy is going to be good. He’ll earn a disc back just like he did in limbo. He has yet to realize that the jukebox is gone for a reason. Dream has no intention of letting Tommy near a disc ever again.

“Right,” Dream leans against the table, notebook in hand. “How long do you think you were gone?”

Tommy keeps staring at the empty spot under the shelves where the jukebox had been. Still, he answers. “Dunno. A year? Maybe more?”

Dream scribbles that down, pressing on. “You were dead for nine days, and from your estimates before, when I’d kill you for... seconds and you’d say it felt like twenty minutes, my best guess is it’s maybe... a day is a month? Obviously, I can’t know for sure. Maybe if I kill you with a clock in your pocket, you could keep track of the days...”

Tommy laughs hoarsely. “Don’t think clocks would work. It’s gotta be like the Nether in that way, right? No night or day.”

Dream hums in reply, writing things down. “Did you ever get tired? Or hungry or anything like that?”

“Nah, just got bored ‘s all...” Tommy slides down the wall, sitting on the floor, still staring off into space. Talking hurts. He wishes he didn’t have to.

Dream’s words catch up to him, finally processing in all their cruelty.

“*Nine days?*” Tommy sits up sharply even as it makes his head spin. “The fuck do you mean *nine days*— t-that had to at least have been fuckin’ twelve or-or two weeks or something.” It’s a feeble excuse. Tommy isn’t concerned by a few days difference, he’s concerned by the months’ disparity. He’d known that time worked differently. He still knew that. It’s another thing to have it right in front of him. “I can’t have— I was gone for a *year*. Or- Or *something*—”

“Tommy,” Dream cuts him off, irritable. “Even in limbo I don’t think you were gone for a year. It was nine months. You should be grateful I left your body outside, it could’ve been *decades*.”

Those few words and Tommy feels like he's under water. He can't breathe. *Decades.* Tommy covers his mouth, frozen for a moment, feeling like he's going to be sick. He stays completely still until the nausea passes. Until now he hadn't eaten in *nine days* apparently and he'd rather not puke.

Dream's mercy extends enough that Tommy is allowed to stay quiet for a minute or so, but his patience wears thin. "Okay, Tommy. Did you ever see Schlatt during all that time?"

"W-Why did you do this? Why'd you do this to me?" Tommy isn't exactly better. He curls inward, rocking slightly, hands balled into fists so tight it hurts. "Why was I— for so long, I—"

"Tommy," Dream snaps his fingers in front of his face. "Pull yourself together, maybe if I actually get some answers those nine days will have been worth it, right?"

Tommy laughs, voice high and hoarse.

"So, did you see Schlatt?" Dream repeats pointedly.

"Schlatt?" Tommy is still lost in his head.

"Yes, *Schlatt*. Don't make me ask again."

"Yeah, yeah I saw him. Only a few times, dickhead—"

"Okay? And what did he say?"

Tommy's eyebrows furrow together. His nails are still digging into his palms painfully. "What'd he *say*? He... He asked if I'd seen Connor. Or Quackity. When I told him no 'cause I'd been fuckin' exiled again he laughed at me—"

"No," Dream cuts him off with an irritable sigh. "I meant what did he say about the revive book? When you asked him, did he know about it?"

Tommy stares at Dream like he's lost his mind, mouth hanging open slightly. "T-The revive book? Asked him? *Asked* him?! T-That— You never *said*— there weren't any instructions y-you just never came to get me, I didn't know— how was I supposed to fucking know to—" Tommy is almost furious, no, he *is* furious. And he's had nine months to lose whatever self control Dream had beaten into him. "You can't fucking do that to me! I didn't *know*! H-How the fuck was I supposed to *know*!" He's screaming, but that just makes his words come out broken and almost incomprehensible. It's horrible when he realizes it's fear as much as anger, that despite his harsh words at Dream, he feels ashamed. Like he's failed in some way.

"It's not fucking fair!" Tommy still doesn't stop, staggering to his feet, struggling to speak beyond a hoarse whisper. "Y-You can't fucking do that to me, you fucking *left me there*! I was *alone*, why didn't y-you—" Tommy doesn't know when he started crying. "W-Why didn't he find me?" He whispers. Without time for rational thought, Tommy falls forward, hugging Dream tightly, and maybe for a moment pretending it's his big brother instead.

Dream had fully intended on hurting Tommy for his outburst, but he is far too shocked by this outcome to move forward in any way. *Exploit that weakness as needed.*

So Dream hugs back. If Tommy wants a brother and a mentor, Dream can play that role, sure. Why not.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I'm sorry that you felt hurt by this, but I had to, okay? Otherwise I wouldn't have done it," Dream doesn't yell at him, he is sure to sound sympathetic, offering an apology, but a careful one. Dream can do no wrong. "So... you were alone?" He steps back and Tommy seems unwilling to let go, finally he caves, but Tommy keeps holding onto Dream's sleeve, like he's scared Dream will leave him too.

"I said I was alone," Tommy mumbles. Resentment he doesn't want rises up. "Wilbur is... he's just *gone*."

"Don't worry, Tommy," Dream ruffles his hair fondly. "You're not alone anymore."

Tommy manages a weak smile. "S-Sorry I got mad, it wasn't- it wasn't *really* at you, eh?"

"It's okay, Tommy. I'll let it slide this time," Dream's words offer a strange mixture of relief and dread. "So, you're mad at Wilbur, huh?"

Tommy sours, jaw tense, bitter anger burns like a fire behind his eyes in an instant. The anger isn't just meant for Wilbur. Some of the anger is *because* he doesn't want to be angry with him. "I dunno where he is. I don't fucking *understand*."

"Hmmm. Maybe he just couldn't find you?" Dream asks mildly, fiddling with his notebook, but not writing anything down. "Or... maybe he just didn't want to see you."

"Yeah," Tommy's mouth feels very dry again. "Maybe." A pause, Tommy staring at the back wall without really seeing it. "I was just alone. Nothing else to it, I guess."

"Well, like I said, I saved you. You're not alone *anymore*."

Tommy nods, still not fully paying attention. "Could... Could Ghostbur come here?" Tommy asks it without fear, but also no expectations either.

Dream's first instinct is irritated anger. He holds back every urge to tell Tommy off, to tell him it's pathetic and selfish that he thinks he can ask for something like that. He chooses a more calculated reply. He turns away from his workbench to face Tommy, head tilted, assessing him. Tommy looks blank, finally tearing his eyes from the wall to look back at him. He's so greyed out. Normally Tommy squirms if Dream stares at him like he's thinking.

"You'd do that?" Dream begins, trying to sound disinterested, but some fascination uncontainable. This is not the bullheaded, ever so self obsessed with being *noble* Tommy he knew from the early days. "You'd condemn your brother to exile with you?"

Tommy doesn't respond well, but still in line with what Dream might have hoped. Anger returns. "*You* said he wasn't my brother, and if he is, he fucking condemned me to exile with him first!" Tommy's hands remain balled into fists at his sides, furious conviction rising. Dream doesn't respond at first, and Tommy stops his outburst, it feels childish when his real

target isn't here to defend himself. Tommy wipes his eyes furiously, stepping back, eyes now locked on the floor like he can burn holes into it. Tommy is all but convinced that Wilbur, in essence, abandoned him to this exile twice. Once as a ghost who walked away, and again as something even deadlier who never came to find him. Tommy never abandoned Wilbur to exile alone. Schlatt even offered him a job at one point, and Tommy had refused. He wouldn't leave Wil behind. He'd stayed in Pogtopia no matter how bad it got. And now... Wil had left him thrice now, hadn't he? It all started the 16th. It only got worse.

"You know what, I don't think that's a good idea, Tommy. For you *or* Ghostbur. You should get used to unattaching yourself from him, from everything outside of here. Just look at what happened with Wilbur leaving you again, it's better if you don't get your hopes up." Dream is at least a little satisfied. Tommy no longer trusts Wilbur more than he trusts him. Exactly as intended. He knew keeping Wilbur away would be important, but this is better than he could've hoped. Tommy is not only free of Wilbur's influence, but his resentment grows louder by the day.

"Yeah, I mean, maybe Ghostbur was just gonna leave me too, right?" Tommy laughs harshly. "Wilbur- I dunno, I thought- I really *thought* when you wanted someone, over there, in limbo or whatever the fuck, they'd come to you. S-So if he *didn't* want me..." Tommy trails off, a lump in his throat. *Everything* he fucking did for Wilbur, and he gets none of it back. All that talk, Wilbur telling him to *run* to get out of here, like he actually *cared*, those hollow plans he offered, telling him he should try and kill Dream- maybe that's what it was all for. One more task for Wilbur's favorite little soldier...

"That's horrible, Tommy. He just left you there, huh? Didn't even stop to say goodbye?" Dream plays his part. It's too easy.

"Maybe he..." Tommy trails off hoarsely, like Dream's kindness makes it worse somehow. His anger is traded for hopelessness as easily as Tubbo had traded him for L'Manberg. "Maybe he just got stuck. Or- Or *unstuck*, you know? Maybe there's a way to move on or some shit."

Dream puts a hand on his shoulder. Tommy doesn't even flinch. "I don't think so, Tommy. Why would Schlatt still be there? I mean, *Schlatt* surely didn't have more to leave behind than Wilbur, right? Even if that were the case... Wilbur was still ready to move on without you?" Dream masquerades sympathy and doubt.

Tommy just keeps staring at the floor. His voice shakes worse. He doesn't want to waste any more tears on a brother who didn't even bother to stick around once. "I *hate* him, sometimes, y'know?" He doesn't.

"I can't blame you. I mean... That's him running away from you *again*, isn't it?"

"Wot?"

Dream names something Tommy had already thought for himself, but that makes it worse too. "In the war with Manberg, he got out as fast as he could, left you behind, and then you found a way back to him even dead, so he had to run even further to get away from you."



“Oh.”

“You know, I’m proud of you, Tommy,” Dream is glad to see the way Tommy jerks up to stare at him, taken aback. “This has been hard, I know, but you’ve adjusted... relatively well so far. I think if we keep working together on this, you’ll keep getting better, okay?”

Tommy frowns, eyebrows furrowed together as he carefully considers Dream’s words. He fumbles to think of a reply. This all feels unnatural. “Okay. Um. Thank you?”

“Don’t mention it, Tommy. Come on. You seem tired,” Dream guides him away from the library, and his brother’s corpse just beyond the wall.

~

Eventually it was bound to come up again. Phil was good at respecting Techno’s aversion to emotions, but it wasn’t just about Techno. Not when it came to this.

“How’s L’Manberg doin’ then? Still a government?” Techno drawls as he meets Phil on the Nether side of the main portal.

Phil laughs dryly. “Yeah, Techno. It is. It’s... fine. Quiet.”

“Quiet? I thought you said Quackity and Tubbo were running the place?” Techno continues to chat over his shoulder, even as he carefully treks through the nether, growing further from the beaten path. They had to get away from well tracked areas to find Netherite nowadays.

“Yeah, well. You know. Tubbo is...” Phil hesitates, following Techno closely. “He says he’s coping. And the kid is good at putting up a front, burying shit. A lot like someone else I know,” he nudges Techno teasingly, who just huffs in reply. “But he finds these projects, and then he does nothing else. Doesn’t talk to people about anything else, doesn’t take care of himself. He’s been doing construction stuff for L’Manberg and like, literally nothing else.”

“Yeah, well, if that happened to me, I’d want something to distract me too,” Techno grumbles, resisting a shiver at that graphic memory that still wounds him just as sharply as it did months ago.

“Yeah. Sometimes I wonder if...” Phil trails off.

“What, Phil?” Techno can tell Phil is hesitating on his behalf.

“That maybe someone from the old days might be healthy for him to talk to about this stuff,” Phil still phrases it very carefully.

“Yeah? You should see if Eret or Fundy are around, then,” Techno remains cold, staring ahead at the narrow corridor through the Netherrack that’ll soon be blown to pieces.

Phil drops the delicacy. “You should tell him.”

“Tell who what, Phil?” Techno knows exactly what.

“Tubbo, I mean,” Phil stops, his pick resting on his shoulder. “About Tommy. He’s... It’s been months and he still hasn’t gotten closure.”

“And you think *I’m* gonna be the one to give him *closure*?!” Techno turns to face him, baffled now. He expected Phil to say he thinks Tubbo deserves the truth, to know what happened maybe, but *closure*? From a horror story?

Phil raises his hands eyebrows raised. “I’d be willing to try anything at this point, dude. Like, he’s not getting over *anything*. And if knowing Tommy wasn’t alone... maybe it’ll at least get him to open up, you know?”

“Why do you care so much about this guy, Phil?” Techno says it before he can think it through, “it’s not like he’s your kid.”

Phil freezes. Techno can see him tense.

A painfully sharp silence broken only by the crackling of scattered fires across the netherrack tunnels. Techno can’t bring himself to look Phil in the eye, guilt like a hole in his chest, and Phil is staring at the ground like it’s the one that let him down instead.

“Phil...” Techno starts weakly.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Phil says mildly. “You’re right. He’s not.” For a moment it seems like Phil is going to avoid the subject altogether. Instead he continues on brutally. “I mean, my son didn’t die alone. That counts for something, right?” Every word is a knife, meant to wound Phil more than Techno. “Do what you want, Techno. But maybe some of us take comfort in knowing the people we love had someone’s hand to hold when they killed themselves.”

Technoblade is considering blowing himself up with a bed right about now, but Phil doesn’t say another word on the matter, walking ahead deeper into the mine without him.

Technoblade doesn’t know. He doesn’t realize that Phil wasn’t just talking about Wilbur.

## Chapter End Notes

I have so much planned and not enough time to write it lol. Hope this'll hold you all over until the Big Stuff begins ;)

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Things are looking up!

But also, I continued with the horror :D

TW: abuse, mutilation, gore, implied violence, actual violence, broken bones. Just. Horror. Mostly just in scenes with Dream ofc.

I'm going to put another chapter summary for this one because it's so dark.

(also I skipped out on my usual editing so forgive any mistakes pls <3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, what do you think?” Dream fidgets across the table from him, where Tommy remains frozen in a state of dread. “I wanted to give you the chance to choose, but I do have other ideas, if you can’t pick.”

Tommy stares at the table in the center of the room, illuminated by a single redstone lamp above. The table has a book open, with anatomical drawing of a human hand, labelled and charted out, showing different layers of bone and tendons. Beside it is a pair of shears.

“I’d be willing to cut off a toe instead if you don’t put up a fuss about this,” Dream takes his silence as thought rather than blank horror.

Tommy blinks, shaking his head. He feels like he might be sick. He’s just staring from the book to the shears.

“Do you want my help? I thought of a way we could make a game out of it, make it easier, you know?”

Tommy is startled enough that it breaks the trance, looking up at him with wide eyes. “A *game*? The fuck do you mean a *game*?”

“Didn’t you *L’Manbergians* ever play games? When you weren’t causing problems?” Dream asks dryly.

“I know– I know what a fucking game is,” Tommy sputters, baffled and more than a little pissed. “I mean– How the *fuck* are you gonna turn cutting my finger off into a *game*?”

Tommy yelps, jumping back when Dream stabs a knife into the table.

“You guys ever play the knife game?” Dream sounds sufficiently smug at how quick Tommy went from irritation to fear.

Tommy stares at the knife. He understands now. It doesn’t make him feel better about anything. “A few times, but Wil and Eret always told us off, so we stopped.”

“Hm. Good, they should’ve. Great way to lose a finger,” he says it like a joke.

Tommy shivers. “I don’t... I don’t like this, Dream. C-Can’t we try something else today?”

Dream shakes his head. “*Tommy*, you got nine days– sorry, nine *months* off, no more breaks. I’d start making a decision, before I make one for you.”

Tommy feels sharp panic. He wouldn’t put it past Dream to take a thumb.

“I-If I lose a toe, I could... My left leg, it’s still sort of stiff and numb from when I had to do a tourniquet,” Tommy stares at the shears, despising the fact that he truly does have to weigh his options.

Dream hums, like he’s considering it too. “Are you *sure*? Well, if you’re less aware of that leg, if it’s numb, how’re you gonna adjust to your balance changing if you can’t feel it?”

“O-Oh,” Tommy hadn’t thought of that. “Maybe not, then. I don’t want to fuck up my legs anymore, I guess. S-So, if I just lose a finger in my left hand, I can still hold shit and write and stuff, right?” Now he looks to Dream for confirmation or approval.

Dream shrugs. “Well, a finger, even from your off-hand, you’ll have a harder time holding a sword or even a shield.”

Tommy is growing more panicked now, stepping away from the table. “But if it’s– If it’s just my pinky or some shit, like, how bad would it be?!”

Dream sighs. “I guess, but even then, y’know?” He’s enjoying himself. He doesn’t care what Tommy loses, it’s just fun to watch him panic. “Hey, calm down. Not like it matters. You’re not gonna be leaving here indefinitely, so it’s not like you have far to walk, and you sure as hell aren’t gonna have a weapon again.” Dream laughs.

Tommy struggles to breathe, his hands feel trembly. “C-Can’t– I don’t want to–”

“Take a deep breath, Tommy,” Dream raises a placating hand. “I’m letting you choose. Besides, if it doesn’t grow back we’ll stop trying there.”

Tommy has never wanted more to *not* regrow a limb. If the next step, Dream takes his *arm*– “B-But I don’t *want*–”

“How about this,” Dream cuts him off. “I’ll give you some time to think about it, I gotta go do something.” Dream leaves him to stare at the shears and the knife on the table.

Tommy backs up until he hits the stone wall as Dream’s footsteps recede.

“No no no no, I can’t– he can’t, he *won’t*–” Tommy’s nails dig into his palms. For all his suffering, none of the damage thus far had been permanent. Not physically, at least. His damaged leg is pretty much his own fault, isn’t it? *He* did the tourniquet. He could’ve just bled out and it would’ve been over sooner.

*Yeah but you didn’t know that then. And Dream left you down there. He waited until you died. That wasn’t on you.*

Tommy has definitely lost his mind. He’s had days back to life, recovery slow and terrifying and painful, but he must still not be in any way sane, because Tommy grabs the knife. He heads for the door.

Oh yeah, he’s *definitely* lost his mind.

Tommy knows Dream went downstairs, he *cannot* follow, but there’s nowhere to run up here.

“W-We’re not bothering with *smart* choices anymore, are we, Tommy?” Tommy mutters, knife held tightly in his right hand. His heart is slamming against the inside of his chest so hard it almost hurts. Nothing good can come of this, but the thought of waiting in that fucking room for Dream to come in and take a thumb is going to make him start trying to bash his head in again.

Tommy looks from room to room, there’s the brewery, he could hide behind a workbench, but that feels worthless. The room with the pool of water *really* scares him, because there’s no way he’d be strong enough to hold Dream’s head under long enough to drown him but it would be *very* easy for Dream to grab him and drown him instead.

The room with the lava.

Tommy has yet to burn to death. He doesn’t plan on starting now, but unlike with the pool of water, all it would take is one good shove and Dream wouldn’t get back up.

*Are you really doing this?*

Tommy ducks behind the raised edge of stone brick around the pool, holding the knife close to his chest. He *cannot* actually be doing this. The amount Tommy had suffered for just *storing* forbidden contraband back in Logstedshire, if Dream finds him waiting with a *knife*–

Tommy will lose a lot more than a finger.

“Oh *fuck* what am I doing?!” Tommy whispers, rocking slightly, still holding the knife like somehow it’ll save him. Tommy can’t catch his breath, he’s gonna pass out, it’s like he can *feel* Dream creeping up behind him.

“*Tommy!*”

Tommy muffles a whimper, hearing Dream shouting his name from down the hall, anger apparent. Tommy wants to keep cowering, but that might be worse, if he comes out now, if he drops the knife–

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

Tommy cries out as Dream grabs him by the hair, pulling him away from the pool of lava.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry—” Tommy shuts his eyes as Dream holds onto his wrist so tight it hurts. Tommy doesn’t drop the knife. He’s so scared, he’s so *stupid*—

“I w-wasn’t gonna—” Tommy is cut off with a yelp when Dream slams him into the wall, knocking the wind out of him with a gasp. Tommy opens his eyes to see the end stepping closer.

“You weren’t gonna *what*, Tommy?” Dream is already in a bad mood from Wilbur being a brat when resurrected, but Tommy cowering in a corner only pisses him off more. And then the little bastard has the audacity to run off with his *knife*.

“You’re being given a *choice* in what happens to you, you should feel *grateful*. And instead you’re planning on, what, trying to *kill* me?!” Dream holds on tighter and Tommy chokes back a scream as his wrist cracks and snaps, bones forced out of place and pushed to the point of breaking.

“No no no I wasn’t! I *wasn’t*!” Tommy is fighting back sobs. “I’m sorry—” Tommy is cut off by another scream. *This is it. He’s gonna cut your fucking hand off.*

“Oh, you’re *sorry*, huh? Then pay attention,” Dream continues to twist and bend his broken wrist. Tommy thinks he might black out. “Sorry isn’t good enough. So let me remind you of how you make it up to me, okay? You do what I say and *only* what I say. I am your god, and you *cannot* kill me. You’re not a threat, you’re an *insult*. It’s pathetic. All this time I’ve spent *teaching* you, and you turn into the same whiny brat I dragged out here in the first place!” He can’t even drop the knife now, Dream has it pinned with his hand. “When I say jump, you say?”

*“Please I’m so sorry I’m so sorry, Dream—”*

Dream cuts Tommy off with another twisting tug at his broken wrist. “Listen for once in your miserable life— When I say jump, *you* say?”

Tommy fights desperately to pull himself together enough to speak, his mind feels overrun by pain and bloody terror. “H-How high,” Tommy whimpers, staring at the ceiling, unable to bear that mask accusing him, tearing into him with empty eyes.

“No, you say *where*. ” Dream squeezes the broken bone tighter to punctuate his point. “If I tell you to go over a cliff you will do it without hesitation.”

“Yes, Dream,” Tommy’s vision is blurred by tears, as he tries to say *anything* to make Dream stop.

“Good,” Dream turns to scolding authority instead of rage in an instant, he loosens his hold on Tommy’s wrist and he feels a split second of relief. Until Dream takes the knife from his weak hold and grabs onto his left hand.

*“Please no—!”*

Before Tommy can get another word in, Dream is cutting through the index finger of his left hand. Tommy gets out half a strangled scream before Dream slams his head into the stone, splitting his skull as easily as smashing an egg.

Dream steps back, panting, giving Tommy’s bloody corpse one more kick for good measure. He’s still fuming, but there’s always a calculation behind everything. Maybe not these bursts of rage, uncontrolled and unforgiving, but Dream designed his game well. Dream didn’t leave out weapons carelessly. Tommy got the knife for the same reason he found Dream’s book, because Dream left them there, he wanted to see what Tommy would do.

Dream hadn’t thought he’d actually have it in him to *take* it.

A point has been proven. Just as he destroyed the food when Tommy hid supplies from him, just as he took Tommy away from Logstedshire once he read the book, Dream now knows for sure that Tommy still needs breaking. Those months in limbo have weakened him in so many ways, but not enough. He seems terrified and eager to please, but sometimes he breaks the wrong way, acts out. Dream will find a way to fix that. Eventually.

He almost wants to leave Tommy dead. Just for a few hours so Tommy panics and thinks Dream has left him again. Alternatively, the sooner Tommy is back, the sooner he can kill Wilbur for being a deranged bastard. First the guy he has tied up in a cell tries to body check him, then the kid he’s been training obedience for *months* hides out with a knife. He could always leave Tommy dead and just *hurt* Wilbur. Their pathetic acts of resistance are only an annoyance. *He* is still the only one with power here. Neither of them can escape him, not even through suicide. No one is looking for two dead people, the L’Manbergians still have the right level of fear and respect for him, so if these two pathetic little rats really want to test him, fine. It means *nothing*.

He continues to try and convince himself that the pair of them didn’t make him furious.

Fine. He’ll bring Tommy back now. He wants to see if this worked. If it does, hey. He gets to saw the kid’s hand off.

Tommy thought he would be okay returning to the void. It’s familiar, therefore it’s *safe*.

Tommy almost doesn’t want to move. If he moves, it’ll become real. So will the next months in this eternity. Tommy has a fleeting thought of trying to get a disc and a jukebox. He knows he’s nowhere near stable enough for that. Maybe he could try to sleep?

Who is he kidding. In this eternity, the first hours will always be the worst. Tommy, with a cold spike of dread, remembers the events leading up to this point. He looks down at his left hand.

“F-Fuck...” Tommy feels tears returning. It doesn’t hurt, but that almost doesn’t seem to matter, because he’s still missing part of his hand. “I-It can still heal—” He remembers what else Dream said. If it heals, this gets *so* much worse. Either he accepts that this is how he is now, or he accepts the mutilation to come.

Tommy balls his hands into fists. It feels uneven, unnatural. Maybe he could try and summon a sword and shield to see if he could even try to fight like he did before. Why should he bother? Dream will never let him *fight* again, especially with that stunt he pulled with the knife... fuck— *why* had he done that? Had his time in the dark really made him forget everything Dream is capable of? He should *know* by now. He's not just weak, he's *powerless*—

“*Wake up.*”

Tommy is on the floor, his head is pounding, he can feel blood still damp beneath him. It's jarring to be brought back after finally a familiar return to the void. Tommy almost doesn't want to look, instead staring up at Dream towering over him. He still has the bloody knife in one hand. Dream doesn't give him a choice. He crouches down in front of him, the knife still too close, and grabs Tommy's left hand. Tommy shuts his eyes.

“Huh,” Dream sounds disappointed. “Hm. That's a shame.” He drags Tommy to his feet. He pauses for a moment. Tommy seems to be waiting for a blow. Dream considers it for a moment. He had crafted strict rules for Tommy's disobedience, from talking back to another blatant escape attempt, but he hadn't planned on Tommy considering *fighting* him. Not to say Tommy was actually going to, Dream actually believed Tommy when he had pleaded with him and said he wasn't going to do anything. Tommy's courage always died the moment Dream actually took a step towards him. That doesn't mean Tommy is going to get away scot free. Dream can take some time and consider what to do. It's not like Tommy will make peace with it if he's forced to wait, more time for his panic to grow and his spiral worsen. “Come on.” He drags Tommy down the hall. Tommy stumbles after him, looking like he wants to say something, some desperate attempt to defend himself, he knows it's useless.

Dream does not turn towards the narrow steps down to the obsidian room. He walks forward to the main hall, throwing Tommy down the steps with a gasp.

“I'll be back in a minute, Tommy. And *please*, do consider running again. I know our current experiment says otherwise, but maybe your legs will grow back. So, go ahead, run for the Nether portal! I'd *love* to find out,” Dream disappears to kill Wilbur Soot again, and Tommy struggles to sit up and against the wall at the base of the steps. He doesn't consider running. He doesn't consider even trying to kill himself. Tommy's helplessness is beyond anything natural.

Tommy's head pounds and his body aches. He knows he's going to have deep bruises on his back soon. His wrist is no longer broken— thank god— but it feels stiff and tense. As if any of that matters. He's probably going to have more broken bones soon enough.

Tommy still hasn't looked at his left hand. He already knows what he'll see.

Tommy keeps staring at the ceiling far enough above it is nothing but shadow, his right hand reaching out to hold his left. His lip trembles as he tries to hold back sobs. His ribs ache enough with every inhale as is. It's healed over at least. Dream for all his anger was precise, cutting right at the base knuckle. Maybe worse than the loss itself, is that Tommy can only feel relief. If it had grown back, Dream would've taken a limb.



He *still* might take a limb considering the stunt Tommy pulled.

Tommy hears a soft warble and looks forward sharply, grateful for his low eye level, as an Enderman had found its way into the hall. It stands on the other side, incuriously wandering.

Maybe Dream is right. Tommy never learns.

“H-Hello?” Tommy whispers it. He doesn’t even know if the Enderman can hear him, let alone understand or care. Either way. Tommy stifles a yelp when in a blur of purple particles, it moves closer.

Tommy is breathing harder now, glancing up to the narrow doorway above. No sign of Dream.

“Please help me,” Tommy whispers, sure to stare directly at its chest, because he definitely will panic and look it in the eye if he doesn’t focus up. “Do you know Ranboo?” The moment Tommy asks he realizes how *fucking insane* he sounds. “Fuck, you can’t even understand me... how did you even get here, we’re way out in the ocean? Teleport, I know, but it’s so far to get to land...” Tommy glances to the portal against the wall. “Nether? Maybe you guys can teleport through portals?” Tommy’s voice grows softer, more desperate, knowing every word he says is asking for suffering. He’s *already* suffering. How much worse can it get? “C-Can you get back to L’Manberg? Do you know where that is? Fuck, I’ve really lost it,” Tommy lets out a whimpering laugh. “I’m talking to an enderman like they can answer back...”

“Tommy?” Dream’s voice has lost its anger. There’s the same agonizing calm as when he caught Tommy reading his vile book. “What’re you doing?”

Tommy’s blood runs cold. “Get out of here!” Tommy screams, scrambling to his feet, about to try and shove the Enderman away, before he can get close, Dream shoots a bolt at it, but it teleports out before it can land.

Tommy must really be insane, because between his own desperate pleading and his racing heart, thinks he heard a gentle chirp that almost sounded like confirmation. It’s too little to be worth any hope, or maybe too insane a thought at all, Tommy feels something like hope anyway.

He really shouldn’t.

Tommy feels a hand on his shoulder. Dream sighs like a disappointed teacher, “why do you *want* me to hurt you?”

~

The conversation between Phil and Technoblade dies off, each caught up in their own heads as they continue searching for ancient debris. Technoblade hasn’t stopped thinking about it. Everything he said carelessly and everything Phil said in turn.

“Y’know, if Tubbo really wants closure, he should go to Dream for that,” Techno says it and immediately winces. He wasn’t trying to cast off responsibility again, but genuinely it didn’t make sense to him. Why knowing someone was there when he died would somehow matter more than putting down his murderer. Phil has yet to reply, so Techno continues stubbornly on. “I don’t know how the guy is still walkin’ around L’Manberg.”

“What?” Phil pauses, finally paying attention, turning to face his friend, brow furrowed and pickaxe loose at his side. “Dream already explained what he saw to Tubbo. He said he was already dead when he got to him.”

“Er, yeah. He sure was dead when Dream got to him,” Techno says uncomfortably. He’s surprised that Phil could be so blasé about this.

“Why’d you say it like that?” Phil’s concern grows alongside his. He already has a bad feeling rising, the answer is growing more obvious by the second. “D’you mean Dream showed up too late?”

Technoblade is struck by bitter dread, everything piecing together at once. “Um. No. Dream *shot* him.”

Phil’s initial shock fades far too quickly, because surely he should’ve known. Phil’s knowledge of Dream consisted mostly of letters from a dead son who had seemed to have died delusional. Phil had taught him how to spot a snake in the grass early on. Phil can only blame himself for missing a snake now.

“Dream killed Tommy?” Phil asks, every word weighted and measured against an answer he already knows is coming. He has to *hear* it.

“Uh. Yep,” Technoblade is taken aback. “Why? What did... What did *you* all think happened to him?”

Phil looks Techno in the eye again, weariness now joined by conviction. “Dream told us that Tommy killed himself.”

Techno blinks in surprise, huffing irritably. “That doesn’t make *sense*. How was he gonna shoot himself in the neck?”

Phil is half considering running towards the portal now, but this just grows stranger and stranger. “Fundy told me they all saw the body. They weren’t gonna *miss* something like that—”

“You can’t heal a corpse, dude. It *had* to have the arrow wound,” Techno shivers.

Phil knows he’s likely to regret this, but he has to ask. “How’d... How’d it happen?”

“Dream shot him in the throat,” Techno says it as clinically as he can.

Phil sees through him easily, worry only growing. “You saw it, Techno? What was Tommy doing out there?”

Technoblade considers dismissing him with a dry quip and a careless comment. It's *Phil*. He can't do that to Phil. He's the only one he has left to be honest with.

"I don't really know. He was... He was running at me, running *from Dream*, as I'd soon find out," Technoblade starts talking and then it's like he can't stop. He sinks down the side of the tunnel, Phil sitting beside him. "He was screaming. It happened so fast," Techno laughs gruffly. "*It happened so fast*. That's what they all say, right? But I had no clue what was coming. First I hear Tommy screaming my name, then there's a bolt sticking through his throat."

Techno could stop there. He feels a wave of nausea, even after all this time. Techno has seen gore before, piles of corpses felled by his own blade. He cannot recall in recent memory a kid crawling through his own blood to get to him as he drowns in it.

"Techno?" Phil puts a hand on his shoulder gently. "You can talk to me. That's fucked, mate. It's okay to be upset by it."

Techno shakes his head. "No, no you don't *get it*, it wasn't just—" Techno stops, a lump caught in his throat. "Tommy was still alive."

"What?" Phil asks hoarsely.

"He— He had to drown first. It wasn't a clean hit. And he *still* tried to get to me, Phil. Like I— Like I could *save him* somehow," Techno doesn't want to get choked up. They both know this cannot stay here with them. They'll need to confront it eventually. Techno just wants to crumble for a second. "I could hear him trying to talk, the way the blood bubbled up, you know?" Technoblade drops his pick, burying his face in his hands as he tries to get the image of that kid dying out of his head. "I... I held his hand. I *told* you, I was there while he was still alive, so... I tried to tell him it was gonna be over soon. Tommy *didn't* kill himself," Techno says forcefully, like he has a point to prove. "When I told him it was gonna be over, he got *more scared*. I could see it in his eyes, like... like he was trying to prove me wrong, or somethin'. It was something else altogether, Phil. After, you know, a soldier goes down, there's usually a little relief that it's gonna stop hurting, right? Tommy looked at me like— Like he knew something I didn't. Like he knew dying wouldn't stop the pain."

Phil shivers. They're both well acquainted with death, Phil even more so with another Death from a different time. This is not the death they know.

"Well, it's over for him now, Techno. Whatever happens. You were there for him," Phil still tries to give him some solace.

Technoblade stands up sharply, stowing his pickaxe and instead he hovers over his axe. "Let's... Quit sittin' around. We've got work to do, right?"

Phil looks towards the main path to the portal. This is going to be hard. "We have to tell Tubbo."

They both set the question aside, more important things pressing in on them, but it still lingers— Why hadn't anyone seen an arrow wound on Tommy's body?

~

Tommy is dead again. The pull of his cells tugging apart as he falls is a relief.

He doesn't move, he remains curled in on himself, his whole body tense, still waiting for the next wound. Tommy hates himself, because despite everything, he'd still rather be alive than dead again. He *shouldn't* because—

*“He wouldn't let me die he wouldn't let me die he wouldn't let me die—”* Tommy whimpers, his eyes tightly shut. It took hours for Tommy to break. Dream was careful to put off fatal injuries, but his caution ended there. At one point Tommy had tried to play dead, anything to make him stop, and Dream hadn't. When Tommy got too weak to scream, Dream still didn't stop. Tommy can surmise Dream is still probably mutilating his corpse.

Between the two kinds of torture, Dream or the void, it's a close call. Right now this is the better hell. He's assuming when Dream brings him back, it won't be for a pat on the back and an apology. Tommy doesn't want to be alone here forever, but here no one is methodically breaking his bones or making him bleed. Tommy is so *tired* of this. He just wants it to *end*, to really end—

*“Tommy?!”*

Tommy cries out, startled and expecting more violence as he covers his head. It wasn't Dream. It was another familiar voice. “W-Wilbur?!”

“Tommy— oh my *god* you're here— fuck, you're actually *here*—“

Tommy laughs, and for the first time in over nine months with nothing, he sees his brother staring back at him.

Then he remembers.

Tommy for once doesn't struggle with *deserve*, he's running at Wilbur and he gets to him.

Not because he deserves to hug his brother, that's not even a thought crossing his mind— No, he deserves to *hit* his brother—

*“You fucking left me!”* Tommy is blinded by the dim lights of the train station, but he doesn't stop, not until he has Wilbur on the floor, fists slamming into Wilbur's startled face. “Where the fuck have you *been* — Why couldn't I fucking find you?!”

“Tommy— Tommy *wait*—”

“Shut up! JUST SHUT UP!” Tommy takes fistfuls of Wilbur's shirt, shaking him. He broke his glasses.

Wilbur doesn't even fight back, he stays flat on his back, eyes wide. Tommy hates that he sees himself in that startled panic, an agonizing silence, Wilbur doesn't say a word. Tommy collapses forward, resting his forehead against Wilbur's chest, still clutching his shirt like he's scared he's going to sink through the floor and abandon him again. Tommy feels a sob

rising in his throat, because he doesn't want to be scared of losing Wilbur. Not when he's already lost him.

"H-How could you do that?!" Tommy chokes out. Tommy falls back as Wilbur sits up, but he doesn't hit the ground, Wilbur hugs him close to his chest.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur gets over his shock as fast as he gets over his bruises. "I'm so fucking sorry, Tommy— I *tried*. He— He wouldn't let me—"

"What the fuck are you talking about, dickhead?" Tommy keeps his eyes closed, all of his anger turning to heartache as he lets his brother hug him.

"Dream brought me back," Wilbur feels Tommy tense at the man's very name. "When he's been killing you— w-when you were here alone for so long," Wilbur tries not to get choked up, Tommy *needs* him stable right now. "He had me in a room alive. So I couldn't— I am so sorry, Tommy—" Wilbur can't contain his own tears anymore, hugging him tightly, as if somehow he could keep him here and safe in doing so.

Tommy's resentment and misery doesn't die at this, but there's something calming about knowing Wilbur didn't leave him by choice. Tommy buries his face in Wilbur's shoulder, breathing in the smell of cigarettes and home.

"I was so alone, Wil. For *so* long I tried to find you I couldn't find you— and Dream— he hurt me *so* bad, man, I can't do this anymore—" Tommy almost feels safe in his brother's arms, as he gently shushes him and holds him tight.

Neither of them want to think about how either one of them could disappear at a mad man's whim.

"What about—" Tommy pulls away, sitting back on the floor and wiping his eyes. "What about *you*, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

Wilbur is staring at him with stunned, indescribable horror. His eyes follow Tommy's left hand as he lowers it from his face.

"Oh— yeah, that's—" Tommy waves him off dismissively. "It's nothing, I was scared he was gonna take my hand off," Tommy laughs shakily.

Wilbur still stares at Tommy's left hand. He finally tears his eyes away with a pained smile, "I'm fine, Tommy. Don't— Don't worry about me."

Tommy nods grimly. He knows when Wilbur is holding back. Tommy's anger returns, cold and useless. "So he did hurt you."

Wilbur shrugs, waving him off the same way Tommy had tried to brush off Wilbur's worry. "Yeah, well. Could've been worse. Could've been stuck with you for nine months," he grins.

"Oh fuck off," Tommy shoves him. Tommy can't remember the last time he smiled. It's nice.

Wilbur looks at him fondly. “I’ve missed you, man.”

Tommy glances up at him, “yeah, missed you too, Wil.”

Wilbur wishes they could keep joking, talk about something else, but it’s haunted him for weeks and haunts him still. “You were alone for a long time, Tommy.”

Tommy’s smile drops and he stares back down at the platform. “Yeah. I was.”

Wilbur already knows the answer, but he has to ask, hands fidgeting with his deck of cards. “Are you... Are you okay?”

Tommy bites his lip, shaking his head. He doesn’t want to break down again. “You know... you know what makes it hurt worse?”

“What, Tommy?”

Tommy looks his brother in the eye. “I can’t figure out what’s worse. Being dead or alive. An hour ago I would’ve said dead, but now...” Tommy sighs. “He just gets worse. Dream, I mean. It doesn’t matter if I behave, he hurts me either way, but when I *do* fuck up...” Tommy shudders. He laughs, sharp and panicked. “I... I talked to an Enderman.”

Wilbur can’t help but laugh through his dread, cards slipping through his hands as he shuffles mindlessly. “You what?”

“Yeah! Asked him for help and everything,” Tommy says it like a joke and not something tragic.

“And did he reply?” Wilbur tries to keep it light, but he’s scared to see where this story goes.

“Dunno. Dream interrupted before I had the chance,” Tommy tries to sound like he’s still joking, but his voice gets higher and shakier with every word.

“And he..?” Wilbur trails off.

Tommy just shakes his head. He cannot bring himself to elaborate.

“Oh,” Wilbur’s cards go still and he begins thinking through how he can break free next time and tear Dream apart with his bare hands.

“How long do you think we’ve been talking?” Tommy asks, staring across the empty tracks.

“Dunno. Maybe... 20 minutes? Half hour?”

“I don’t know how long I have, Wil. And if he’s gonna do that thing, bring you back when he kills me, I dunno when I’ll see you again—“

“Hey, don’t talk like that,” Wilbur puts a hand on his shoulder. “You’re here *now*. ”

“Okay. Well. Just want you to know I—“

*“Wake up.”*

Tommy comes to feeling like he still has a full body bruise. Wounds linger after resurrection. He doesn't want to remember how bad it must have gotten for him to have died and still come back battered and struggling to move.

“Hey there, Tommy! Didn't even notice I'd lost you there for a minute! Can't have you missing all the *fun*, right?” Dream is still standing over him. Dream's right hand is bandaged. He probably broke his knuckles on Tommy's face. “Aw, looks like you healed up, huh? Guess we'll have to start over then.”

Tommy isn't lucky enough to die this time. Dream learned from his mistakes, when to draw the line between a broken rib and punctured lung. Eventually Tommy blacks out. That's as close to mercy as he'll get. He never got to tell Wilbur he loved him.

Tommy's vision is blurry, his right eye swollen shut. He's coherent enough to see purple eyes. Tommy just barely processes he's still alive and locked in the dark cell, not even bothering to take inventory of broken bones and messy stitches covering him, he's more distracted by the towering figure above him, stooped over from the ceiling of the cell.

“Ranboo...?”

This must be a dream, because the obsidian is still blocked off, there's no way in here, and Ranboo doesn't *look* like that. It's eerie and unnerving, this version of Ranboo is taller, his eyes glowing purple instead of their usual red and green. He doesn't say a word and his expression is utterly blank. He just stares down at him like a harbinger and a witness all at once. It's definitely Ranboo, half white and in that same suit, but there's something changed.

Tommy doesn't care if this is a dream at this point, he still reaches a trembling hand out to Ranboo, half of his fingers crooked from fresh breaks. “Please help me. *Please please please* help me, Ranboo.” Tommy's throat hurts and crying burns the black eye swollen shut, but he can't stop pleading with everything he has. “Help me. Oh *god*— please just help me—”

This strange fake-Ranboo extends a hand with long, claw like fingers, like he's about to take Tommy's and help him stand.

Then there's the distant and muffled sound of a door slamming and dream-Ranboo turns around sharply, staring back towards the wall of obsidian. There's the sharp sound of shattering glass and Tommy cowers, covering his head, expecting acidic burns or shards to cut him, but then he realizes, fuchsia liquid seeping into his wounds and pain dulling.

Before Tommy can say another word, to ask what the *fuck* Ranboo is doing here, he *disappears* in a flurry of purple particles.

Tommy didn't know Ranboo could do that.

He'd *healed* him, and left.

~

Ranboo doesn't remember how he got here. It's nothing new. He wakes up not far from home, just outside the main Nether portal.

What's different is Ranboo realizes he's burning. He's *crying*. Ranboo's hands shake as he quickly uses his sleeve to brush away tears. He feels sad. Scared too. He can't remember why. Ranboo manages to stifle his tears, wiping them away before the burns sink in. Then he takes out his memory book, sickening dread resign as this persistent feeling tells him something is *deeply* wrong. Ranboo gets to the latest page, startled to find runes written instead of letters. Ranboo isn't naturally fluent, but he can translate with some effort. He sits right there on the ground and scrambles for a quill, writing out each translated letter on the next page:

*FIND TOMMY*

## Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah things are all comin together ;D

CHAPTER SUMMARY: (this will still mention violence, but will not describe it)

(first section has the mutilation and broken bones) Dream wants to see if limbs grow back and plans on cutting off one of Tommy's fingers. When Dream leaves (to revive Wilbur, unbeknownst to Tommy of course), Tommy panics and grabs the knife, hiding from Dream. Dream returns, furious to find Tommy not only hid but hid with a knife, cuts off a finger, and kills him. When he brings Tommy back, he's still in trouble. Dream leaves him alone again to kill Wilbur, at which point Tommy sees another Enderman who has somehow made it into the vault. Tommy, in a moment of bravery or maybe more stupidity, asks it if he knows Ranboo, where L'Manberg is, if he could help him. Dream interrupts and tries to kill the Enderman, but it flees before he can.

~

(second section references Tommy's death in front of Techno) Phil and Techno continue their conversation from the last chapter. Technoblade mentions Tubbo should take care of Dream if he wants closure, when Phil questions why, they both realize there has been a serious misunderstanding here. Phil is told Tommy was murdered by Dream, not the suicide story they were given. There is some confusion over why no one noticed an arrow wound in his neck if it was staged as a suicide. Techno finally describes what he saw to Phil, letting his horror show with someone he trusts. They both decide they need to tell Tubbo.

~

(implied violence in this section, injuries are mentioned and described) Tommy is dead again and he's grateful, because Dream had been punishing him badly for what was basically a failed escape attempt. Dream killed him by accident in the midst of it, because Wilbur is still dead too. Tommy is furious at first for Wilbur abandoning him, until Wilbur explains. They reconcile after months and/or weeks apart, still mourning their horrible circumstances. Tommy is revived. Dream hurts him further because he



healed, enough that Tommy blacks out, and leaves him in the dark cell. Tommy wakes up to find he is not alone. A strange version of Ranboo with purple eyes stands over him. Tommy begs him for help. Enderboo doesn't say anything, but he looks like he's going to help him, until they hear Dream outside. Enderboo quickly splashes a healing potion on Tommy before teleporting out. Tommy is all the more convinced he was dreaming.

~

Ranboo is near the main portal and doesn't remember how he got there. He's more startled to find he's crying and feels scared and sad without knowing why. He finds something written in his memory book in runes. He translates the two words: FIND TOMMY

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

*Dark figures and old enemies and desecrated graves.*

*Maybe hope can come of this.*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy must have been dreaming. Or hallucinating, or delirious, but he doesn't know how a hallucination can make his wounds hurt less. He doesn't know why he'd dream up some scary version of Ranboo instead of *normal* Ranboo, or Tubbo as he had before. A dark figure towering over him wasn't exactly a calming delusion, although he had still reached for him. Tommy stays on the ground, looking at his hands. It's hard to see in the dark, but even with the broken bones, the external cuts had definitely healed. Tommy tries to sit up, giving up with a sharp gasp as his head pounds and everything hurts.

It's strange how seeing someone again can make missing them worse. Tommy misses Wilbur so much it hurts alongside the rest of him. He wants to go *home*. He wants to go back to L'Manberg and find his big brother waiting for him, proudly in uniform. He wants to feel safe again behind the walls Tubbo and Eret built. He wants it all to stop there. No duels, no discs, no wars. Why had independence *mattered* so much? If Tommy had learned anything, survival had to outweigh glory. Not even survival— this hadn't been a matter of survival for Tommy in a long time— but prevention of harm.

Even in this exile there had been a time where he had stood by the revolution with faith as undying as him. Tommy had spent some of his worst years— or rather, what had once *been* his worst years— believing L'Manberg was worth the harm. He didn't know if it was worth it anymore.

He's not so naive to think L'Manberg ever was merely those towering walls nor the city on stilts that rests there now. Tommy never found home in that. L'Manberg was everything he loved and was loved by in turn. It was *home*. Even without his brother, it remained defiantly, obstinately, devotedly home.

Until he was taken from them instead.

*Is this it? Is this where you give up on home? Give up on yourself?*

He feels tired.

*After everything, is this it?*

Tommy never got to tell Wilbur he loved him.

*Is this it?*

The wall of obsidian opens.

Tommy doesn't move. He doesn't even flinch at Dream's approach. Dream doesn't seem to notice that Tommy had healed somewhat. The violence had been so chaotic it's hard to tell which wounds were pre and post revival.

"Tommy?" Dream crouches down. He grabs Tommy's wrist. He doesn't break it. He holds it until he feels a pulse. "There you are. Thought I'd accidentally lost you again."

Tommy says nothing, following Dream with his good eye.

"What, nothing to say?" He says it like a joke. "Come on, then. It's only fair. I broke you, now I gotta fix you." Dream picks him up off the floor and even if Tommy had the will to protest, he instead struggled to draw breath as broken bones were jostled carelessly. Dream takes him upstairs and Tommy almost considers fighting again, expecting to be dropped on the ground in a pool of his old dried blood as Dream decides what to do with him next.

Instead, Dream takes him to the brewery, the air itself has the sickly sweet smell of health potions still being made and blaze powder sharply burning. Dream sets him down on the table.

"You're *quiet* for once. Or did screaming mess up your vocal chords?" Dream shuffles around the room. Tommy doesn't try and get up from the table. He closes his eyes. The redstone lamps are too bright. Dream exhales a laugh. "Why am I bothering, if they are, it's not like you can *answer* that..."

Tommy doesn't move. He's too tired to beg, to try and hide. Dream could start cutting him up into little pieces and Tommy isn't sure if he'd have the energy to ask him not to.

"Sit up," Dream makes him flinch by speaking up right next to him, a hand on his shoulder, helping him sit up. Without him Tommy was confident he wouldn't have been able to move. "I am going to give you a health potion, but I gotta set the bones first, okay? Otherwise they're gonna heal back wrong." Dream says it so gently, like Tommy's anxiety is his top priority right now.

Tommy finally squints at him, one eye still swollen shut. He doesn't know why he bothers with wariness. His feelings towards all of this won't change what happens to him.

Dream takes that as assent enough. He takes Tommy's right hand, Tommy inhaling sharply through his teeth as every motion hurts. He focuses on staying vertical.

"You, uh. You might want something to bite down on for this part," Dream almost sounds sympathetic. "I'll try and be quick. I can only set the bones in your hand, we'll just have to

hope the health pot takes care of the ribs. Does anything else feel broken? I mean like, actually broken, not bruised.”

Dream mentions broken bones so casually, like he wasn't the one who broke them. Tommy just wants him to get it over with. Tommy feels like the floor is swaying beneath him. Breathing hurts. He must be drawing this out on purpose.

Dream assesses him carefully. “Hm,” he grabs onto Tommy’s left shoulder. Tommy almost screams as the action sends blinding pain through him. “Shit, sorry, Tommy,” Dream immediately lets go as Tommy starts to tilt forward, tears blurring his vision further. Dream keeps him upright with a hand on his good shoulder. “It’s a good thing you’re so skinny now. It’s easier to look for breaks. Collarbone is broken. Can’t really set a collarbone.” Dream shrugs. “Okay, hand,” Dream extends his own expectantly. Tommy doesn’t look as he lets Dream take his right hand. “Good news. Looks like only a couple of them are broken. The rest are just dislocated I think.”

Tommy hears something crack. He must have blacked out. He blinks awake staring at the redstone lamp directly above him. He’s still on the table. His hand actually *does* feel better. The rest of him less so.

“Good, you’re awake!” Dream slowly helps him sit up. “I was waiting. Bones are set, you just gotta drink this.”

Tommy still feels nauseous, but he manages to get through the small bottle. It burns at first, then little sparks of agony as he’s pieced back together again. Tommy feels his collarbone pop back into place and heal over. His hand stops hurting, the bruises at least fade. He can open both of his eyes.

“Better, right? Here,” Dream hands him a golden apple. “That’ll help with the pain, make the rest of the healing go a little faster.”

Tommy accepts. His hands are trembling violently, visibly so as he struggles to take it. He’s sitting up on his own. Breathing is only uncomfortable instead of agonizing. The apple makes his head feel less foggy as well. Enough to speak at least. “Why’re you... you’re being nice to me. Why do you give a shit if I’m in pain or not?” Tommy’s voice trembles alongside the rest of him, as painful and foggy memories threaten to surface. “Y-You were—you were *furious* with me—”

Dream scoffs, “you’re still debating that, are you? Look, you fucked up, I punished you, and now we’re even. Sure, this time you fucked up *bad*, so I had to hurt you a little worse than if you *hadn’t* fucked up that bad, but come on. I’m not gonna hold a *grudge*, Tommy.”

“Right...” Tommy mutters. He doesn’t trust this, not in whatever friendly way Dream is attempting to garner, but it still feels like Dream is planning on being peaceful for now. Dream changes. Tommy knows this. Sometimes he’s nice for a little while. Maybe the more honest truth of it is Tommy has deeply buried his memories of the past hours. Utter avoidance is the only way he can be this close to Dream without his heart beating out of his chest.

Dream seems to be more restless too, shuffling around the room, putting things away quickly. Tommy feels cold dread when Dream goes silent, still facing the brewing stand. “Since we’re... even now, what were you saying? To the Enderman?” His tone remains calm, unfeeling except for some innocuous curiosity. It feels like a trap lying in wait. “Tommy?” Dream asks when Tommy remains silent. He still doesn’t sound angry. He still doesn’t turn around. Tommy could be running for the door for all Dream knew. Except he did know. Tommy wouldn’t run now.

“It was s-stupid, I was—” Tommy swallows, his mouth suddenly very dry. Dream had fixed him just to break him again, surely. He stares at Dream, waiting for him to turn around with a knife or poison or *something*. He still doesn’t move. “W-Wasn’t thinking. I- I asked him if he knew Ranboo,” Tommy laughs, high and panicked and against his own bidding. “It was a *joke*, really! Asking if he *knew Ranboo*, I-like, like he could even *understand* me—”

“Okay, Tommy,” Dream silences him with two calm words. He turns around. He doesn’t have anything in his hands, not weapons or potions or a book. “It’s fine. I mean, I *told* you directly to stay away from endermen, and you disobeyed me, but like I said. I made sure you paid for it. We’re even.”

“R-Right, even,” Tommy’s nails dig into the edge of the table, still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Come on,” Dream takes one step towards him and Tommy falls back off the table, irritating too many bruises, scrambling to get away from him, already covering his head, waiting for the next blow. Dream is unfazed. “Hey, it’s okay, Tommy,” his voice stays calm, maybe even an inkling of caring. Dream approaches, but he doesn’t kick him or anything, he just puts a hand on his shoulder, letting go when Tommy flinches like he’s been shocked. “I’m not gonna hurt you unless you do something wrong. You know that. Now, come on. Good to see you can walk again.” Dream still doesn’t hit him, he doesn’t grab him or even yell at him. He waits, offering Tommy a hand off the floor.

Tommy eventually uncurls, eyeing the offered hand warily. He accepts. Tommy has healed plenty, but even moving still hurts, the bruises healed enough to go from a deep purple to mottled green.

Dream keeps an arm around him as he’s still unsteady. Tommy is tense the whole time.

“Glad you’re better, Tommy. I’ve got... I’ve got some stuff to do, to figure out, but I should be back by tomorrow,” Dream leaves him in the lit cell.

“Tomorrow..?” Tommy hates that he still grows anxious at the thought of Dream leaving him here alone. Dying of thirst in that room for a week, the memory lingered. “What’d you got to do?”

Dream pauses. *Figure out if your stupidity has collateral. If I have to take you somewhere else.* “That’s not really your business, is it, Tommy?”

There’s enough threat in his tone that Tommy steps back. “S-Sorry I just meant... I don’t want to be alone. That’s all. Sorry.”

“Hm,” Dream smirks behind his mask. “Aw, Tommy,” Dream steps forward, pretending not to notice Tommy flinch, ruffling Tommy’s hair. He keeps doing that. When he’s approving, he messes with Tommy’s hair. Like patting a dog. Tommy hates himself for still somehow finding the act reassuring. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon enough. I left you some food. Write me something or whatever. You’ve been alone plenty before.”

“Yeah,” Tommy folds his arms over his chest, making himself smaller. “Guess so.”

“Alright. See you soon. You better be alive when I get back, Tommy. Or I’m gonna be very disappointed in you,” Dream gives a weak admonishment should Tommy try to kill himself.

“Yes, Dream.”

Then Tommy is alone again.

It’s so unnerving how sharply he can go from being absolutely *terrified* of Dream and desperate for his approval. He can’t pretend those two things aren’t connected. He wants Dream to come back.

*No. No, you miss Wilbur. He’s the one who gives a shit about you. You know that now, he didn’t want to leave you.*

“Wil isn’t coming back,” Tommy snaps at the empty cell. “Dream is, so...” Tommy shakily sighs, sitting on his bed, wringing his hands. “I just gotta stop *fighting*, if I’d just *let* him cut off a finger, it would’ve just healed after a-and I wouldn’t have gotten any stupid fucking ideas to do *exactly* what Dream asked me not to and then he wouldn’t have— He wouldn’t—” Tommy rubs his eyes, all the more aware that his left hand still feels wrong. “It wouldn’t’ve hurt like that...” Tommy mumbles.

An old thought returns to him. So many months ago, when he had finally spoken to Wilbur after Dream took him to the vault, so much time spent dead. He can’t remember exactly, but he knew it was in the early days. Wilbur had asked him something, something Tommy had been torn away before he could answer.

*“You know you don’t deserve this, don’t you?”*

Tommy doesn’t know what he deserves anymore. Maybe it’s not about *deserve*, not in this life at least. It’s more about what he can get. All he has is Dream.

~

### *FIND TOMMY*

Ranboo stares down at those words like somehow they’ll change.

“Find Tommy...” Ranboo mutters under his breath. “Okay. What’s that supposed to mean, me?” He sighs, pacing the length of his home in New L’Manberg. He stops, looking out the front windows towards the distant mountain and the tunnel through it, a dark and reluctant understanding dawning.

He'd walked right past Tommy, hadn't he? He hadn't even bothered to look that way, too caught up in rereading those words, desperately searching his very limited memory for some kind of explanation. There shouldn't have even been a debate, surely. There's only one place left to look for Tommy.

So Ranboo goes to the grave. He gets to the top of the hill and immediately knows something is wrong, scrambling down, not caring as he slides through the dirt. Here he slows, book held close to his chest, because Tommy's grave is not as it once was.

It's desecrated. The headstone is unmoved, but the earth... Ranboo knows exactly what this looks like, he feels its wrongness in his chest. It looks like someone— or something— had tried to *dig Tommy up*. Ranboo is scared to step any closer, keeping a few yards away, terrified if he moves he'll begin to smell rot. He'll see the ruined remains of an old friend amongst the dirt. Even from here, Ranboo can see the way the grass clings to the dirt almost neatly where it had been piled to the side, a messy echo of how Endermen moved their blocks.

Ranboo stares, dread and horror rising, one thought circling and persistent, *did I do that?*

"Ranboo! Hey, I don't see you over here very much, you doing alright, bossman?" Tubbo approaches from behind the gravestone, a bundle of oxeye daisies at his side. He hasn't seen the disturbed earth yet, too distracted by Ranboo being there at all. Ranboo just keeps looking down. Tubbo follows his gaze.

"Holy shit— What the *fuck*— " Tubbo's voice trembles, getting higher with every word as he stumbles back. It's only half dug up, really. Enough that Tubbo thinks for a second he saw the red of the L'Manberg flag. The one that had been wrapped around Tommy's *body*. "Oh *god*," Tubbo stumbles further away and gags. "What kind of sick fuck digs up a *grave*?!" Tubbo is almost screaming now, the flowers abandoned on the ground. "No— No fucking way, someone has been— someone has been *doing* this!" Tubbo's hands are balled into fists as he half paces the clearing, looking for a fight that isn't there.

"What do you mean?" Ranboo finally speaks, soft and unsure.

"*Someone* has been stealing the flowers I leave half the time, and I guess that sick fuck had to take it a step further and— and—" Tubbo can't even say it. He hasn't felt anger like this in a long time, anger so easily overshadowed by grief unyielding. It's been months. Tubbo is in no way better. "Come on. We're— I'm going to get everyone together, *anyone* who is active right now, they'll either meet us in the Community House or I will hunt them down one by one," Tubbo sets off at a quick pace towards the prime path, his communicator in hand.

"Tubbo?" Ranboo, startled, hurries after him. Still caught up in his own thoughts and potential guilt. "What're you... what're you talking about?"

"Someone has been stealing Tommy's flowers! A-And now they fucking *destroy* his grave— like—" Tubbo's voice trembles with rage.

Ranboo feels more panicked. He *hasn't* been stealing flowers, surely. He wouldn't dig up Tommy's grave, he *couldn't*, that's sick—

*<Tubbo\_> Everyone who is here right now come to the community house. If you are not there I will consider you an enemy of L'Manberg and find you*

Ranboo reads the message with wide eyes. "T-Tubbo, you can't be serious—"

"If they're innocent they'll have no reason not to show!" Tubbo snaps over his shoulder.

*<CaptainPuffy> 0-0*

*<Awesamdude> Everything ok?*

*<Quackity> wtf Tubbo u can't just declare that*

Tubbo paces the empty community house while Ranboo watches on anxiously.

"Tubbo, man, what the hell is going on?" Quackity gets there first, looking irritated and worried, Sapnap trailing after him equally confused by his place in all this, likely dragged along by his fiancé. "You should at least ask me before putting a target on everyone's backs—"

"Someone tore up Tommy's grave," Tubbo says sharply, like that answers everything. It's enough to silence Quackity for the moment, staring at the young president with wide eyes.

"Hi, Tubbo! I'm here!" Ghostbur is the next to show, oddly enough. Tubbo hadn't even factored in the ghost. He doesn't question the threat or Tubbo's anger, simply waits quietly.

"Tubbo, are you okay?" Sam is immediately concerned. He already has his sword on hand.

"Someone tore up Tommy's grave," Tubbo repeats sharply, deeming no other explanation needed.

"They *what?*" Puffy's eyes widen as she enters following Sam.

"Tommy's *grave?*" Ghostbur laughs. "Why would Tommy have a grave, Tubbo?"

Tubbo has neither the patience nor the time to deal with a dead man's ignorance. "Tommy is dead, Ghostbur."

Ghostbur is frozen for a moment, continuing on in the smallest voice. "What? I don't... I don't understand..."

"And I can't explain it to you right now, so. You can stay here if you're quiet," Tubbo snaps.

Ghostbur stares at him with wide, tearful eyes. He backs up and quickly draws blue from his pocket. He doesn't say another word, drifting out of the community house in the direction of L'Manberg.

Tubbo is too full of grief to make room for guilt too.



Those gathered shift uncomfortably but no one is brave enough to scold him for being mean to the ghost.

Tubbo seems to have neglected how many people were reachable on the server right now as this gathered crowd stare at him expectantly. Tubbo also doesn't seem to realize it's not a matter of threat which gets them all there, but concern for Tubbo.

They were all here not for threats, but because they cared about someone enough to at least see what might be wrong.

"Right," Tubbo stops his pacing, grimly turning to face them all, all staring at *him* for answers, not anger. He will gladly give them both. "Someone has been stealing flowers from Tommy's grave—"

"*Flowers?*" Sam repeats in surprise.

"Yes," Tubbo continues on impatiently, "but it's gotten worse than that. Someone fucking—" Tubbo's voice shakes and he cuts himself off, taking a deep breath. "S-Someone tried to dig Tommy up."

Ranboo shifts uncomfortably again.

Then two more far more surprising arrivals join their ranks.

"What's, uh. What's goin' on here, guys?" Technoblade laughs nervously, stepping back from the crowd.

"Technoblade," Quackity frowns and eyes him carefully. "Why, what do you know about all this?"

"Uh. Nothin'? Look, man, I'm just here to talk to Tubbo—"

"Yeah that's why *all* of us are here," Puffy says pointedly.

Technoblade laughs nervously, "um, yeah. Don't think it's for the same reasons."

"Why? Did you have something to do with tearing up Tommy's grave?" Tubbo turns on him sharply.

"No? That's not it at all." All eyes are on him now. "So, uh," Techno freezes. He has no idea how to begin this.

Phil watches him for a moment to see if he will continue. He doesn't. Phil steps forward. "Tubbo, we have something to tell you that... maybe would be better done in private," Phil glances to the group uncertainly.

Tubbo is terse and cold. "No, Phil, this isn't a good time. Someone ruined Tommy's grave and—"

"Tubbo," Phil continues with soft concern. "It's about Tommy."

The silence somehow gets heavier, Tubbo staring at him, anger not gone, but more so hesitating.

“Tell me. You can say it in front of all them. That’s basically why they’re here because—” Tubbo stops as his voice begins to break, stabilizing himself. He’s a president, not a child. “Because of Tommy. So. Go on. Out with it.”

Phil glances to Technoblade, not expecting anything of him, merely asking.

Techno sighs. This would not be easy. *Feelings* were not his area of expertise. “So, I was there. When Tommy died. I was with him,” he starts with both the easiest part and the hardest. Technoblade looks Tubbo in the eye, seeing shock turn to fear to horrified, desperate curiosity. “He wasn’t alone.”

Tubbo doesn’t say a word, he just stares, pale and overwhelmed by the whiplash this day has brought.

“Why’re you bringing this up now? What’s the point?” Quackity speaks up instead, defensive on Tubbo’s behalf.

“I’m not done yet. Dream told you guys Tommy killed himself. Uh. He didn’t. Dream killed him.”

“What the hell are you talking about, man?” Sapnap of all people is the one to step up to the plate. He had followed Quackity here and had little investment in the goings on, until now. “He wouldn’t do that. You shouldn’t lie about stuff like that.”

Technoblade lets out another gruff, uncomfortable laugh. “Dude. I am *not* lying. I wouldn’t lie about something like this. Why would I? Dream shot him. Right through the throat.”

“Tommy fucking killed himself,” Tubbo finally speaks, fury lacing every word. “I saw the body— there wasn’t— it wasn’t an injury on his *throat*, if this is some kind of sick joke maybe try harder—”

“Look, I know what I saw,” Techno cuts him off sharply. “Trust me, I won’t be forgetting any time soon.” *He died holding my hand.* The thought lingers in the forefront of his mind, but he doesn’t voice it aloud. He keeps that vulnerability to himself.

“Why are you only telling us this *now*?” Quackity remains equally suspicious.

“I sorta thought you all already knew? Didn’t get why Dream was still walkin’ around, but I guess I don’t understand much about you government types,” Techno continues on dryly. He seems more careful now, their hostility is definitely not making him want to stick around.

“What about you, Phil? Do you really believe this?” Tubbo turns to someone he trusts a modicum more than Technoblade.

“Yeah. I do. I...” Phil trails off. He doesn’t want to be harsh, but it’s clear Tubbo still needs convincing. “There was still blood on the ground outside Techno’s place. Weeks ago, but I saw it.”

Tubbo takes a shaky breath, stomach turning at the thought. “I’m gonna kill him,” he says quietly. “I’m gonna fucking destroy that man, when I get my hands on him—”

“Whoa, Tubbo. Slow down, this shit needs *planning*, okay?” Quackity is quick to soothe him.

“Hold on, I don’t get how you guys are believing this,” Sapnap still cuts in.

Puffy joins the fray. “I don’t know Dream as well as you, Sapnap, but lately... He hasn’t been *right*. You know that. What about...” Puffy thought on it for a moment. “What about George? Didn’t Dream put him on the throne only to take him off? That’s kinda a shitty thing to do.”

Sapnap frowns, without a retort.

“Not to mention he *walled off L’Manberg*,” Quackity points out sharply. “Made us exile Tommy in the first place—”

“You guys stressing out about Tommy?”

Several heads swivel around to face the man who had sauntered into the group uninvited. He’s munching on carrots.

“Yes, Connor. We are,” Tubbo’s voice is clipped and short.

“This is a bit serious, Connor. Don’t know if this is the best time for you to be here, so.” Puffy nods him along to the door he had been heading to. “You need something?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I was walkin’ around. Heard shouting. Came in and heard you guys talking about Tommy,” Connor nods wisely. They all stare at him, calm and cheery amongst the tension like a bad punchline.

“Look, man, I think you should leave, this is not a good time for you to hop in for a social call,” Techno gestures to the door.

“Um, pretty sure Tubbo asked for *everyone* to come here, so.” Connor ignores the several blatant efforts to kick him out of the Community House. “Hey, he’s a good kid. I’m here ‘cause I care, not just to be nosy. Dream took him. Is that what you’re all still wigged out over?”

Everyone freezes, horror like a fog filling the room. Connor seems utterly oblivious to the monstrous nature of what he’s just said.

“H-He *took* him?!” Tubbo sputters.

“Wait, wait, Connor, really, you saw a guy dig up a *kid’s grave*, and walk off with a corpse, and you didn’t think to tell, like, *anyone*? Like that’s not totally fucked?” Quackity’s rage is better contained than Tubbo’s, who looks murderous.

Connor steps back, hands raised passively. “Whoa, *whoa*, come on, man. I would’ve let you guys know if he went grave robbing or like, walked off with a dead body, now *that* would be shady—”

“Wait, wait, so, he *didn’t* take Tommy? Why’d you say that?” Philza cuts him off.

Connor clarifies, stubbornly oblivious to the serious nature of the conversation, or maybe he’s very much aware but keeps his tone light regardless. “Oh yeah Dream pulled him out of the grave and walked him back to wherever.”

“*Walked* him back?” Sam asks.

“Oh, yeah, he brought him back first, of course. Made sense. Easier than carrying him. Saw it outside my door.”

In a single moment everything changes, all of them staring at Connor with stunned, wide eyes as his words dawn on them and what they apparently mean. Maybe not belief just yet, but raw shock. This doesn’t make sense. It’s terrifyingly close to good news.

Puffy breaks the silence first. “Connor, what do you mean by that?”

“I’m living in Tommy’s old house!” Connor explains. They have to admire his confidence. Eight people all staring at him like he’s an offense and he continues on without hesitation. “Heard someone scream, went to the window in the doors, and saw Dream with Tommy. Not that hard.”

Tubbo stares at Connor, still eating carrots, and he almost wants to strangle him. Those carrots are from Tommy’s garden.

“And you *know* he’s supposed to be dead?” Techno asks dryly.

“Yeah, yeah, but he’s not anymore. No clue how Dream figured out necromancy, but there ya go.” Connor still speaks cheerily. “I mean, he walked off with him *willingly*. Like, if he’d dragged the kid out of there kicking and screaming I woulda done something— I mean not right *then*, Dream is kinda scary sometimes, but I probably would’ve let you know, Tubbo. Why, are you guys worried about it?” Connor grows more curious now. “Wouldn’t Tommy have like, done something if he was being kidnapped or whatever? Dream brought him back to life, I sorta assumed they were buddies ‘cause of that.”

“Shut up,” Tubbo can’t hold back his anger anymore.

“W-What?” Connor laughs, baffled. “I’m trying to—”

“You don’t have the fucking right, Connor, to come in here and-and talk about Tommy being alive when we know that’s not possible. He was on his last life. I *saw* his body. You’re lying, you’re fucking *lying*. Tommy is dead! H-He was on his last life, you don’t *come back from that*,” Tubbo’s voice is shaking, he almost wants to hurt Connor. Mostly for making him hope again.

“Why would I lie about something like this?”

“When was this, Connor?” Philza speaks up. “Did you see him tear up the grave?”

“What? No, it looked fine when I went over there the next morning. This was *months* ago, though.”

“How the fuck did you not mention this sooner?!” Quackity snarls.

Connor steps back, eyebrows raised, not expecting such defensive company. “None of my business. I was sorta under the impression Tommy didn’t want to be found. Dream brought him back to life,” Connor frowned, trying to piece together memories from a *very* late at night a long time ago. “Tommy was freaked out at first, which, made sense considering he was dead before, but Dream said something to him and they both got up and left. That’s it.”

“Y-You’re lying,” Tubbo repeats hoarsely, desperately searching the man’s expression for understanding.

“Connor? Can you explain what you mean by... by *necromancy*?” Puffy tries to be fair to them both, despite the disconcerting choice in topic.

“Who cares how he explains he *obviously* has to be lying,” Tubbo snaps.

Quackity shifts uncomfortably. “I mean. I’ve *heard* stuff. About necromancy, but... everything so far has seemed like bullshit, right?”

“You’ve heard stuff about necromancy?!” Tubbo turns on his VP, frustration only rising.

Quackity grows sheepish, looking to defend himself. “Well, after Schlatt died– Okay, this was *months and months* ago, man–”

“Y’know, I don’t think he’s lying,” Ranboo finally speaks, he’d been quiet and anxious through the bickering, but now he finds the courage to speak up, concerning thoughts important enough to be drawn to the surface.

“W-What?” Tubbo freezes, turning to his cabinet man in muted surprise, anger fading quickly.

“I don’t think Connor is lying. It didn’t... It didn’t make sense to me before now, but...” Ranboo hesitates, like he’s scared of how this desperate audience will respond, but slowly he gets out his memory book, flitting through pages, before turning it around to face them. Runes take up the better part of the page, but written in all caps beside it, a translation.

### *FIND TOMMY*

“I don’t know how it got there,” Ranboo tries to explain as they keep staring at him. “It showed up earlier, and I couldn’t remember writing it. I went to Tommy’s grave after, that’s why I was there, but I don’t know what I was supposed to do in that type of situation...”

“Why didn’t you say something before?” Quackity sounds accusing.

“Why would I have?” Ranboo closes the memory book, holding it close to his chest. “If he’s dead... seeing ‘find Tommy’ isn’t enough to make me forget I saw his dead body too.”

This changes things, for all of them, but Tubbo especially. Through all of these months, Ranboo has been one of the few people he’s left his trust with.

“Okay, well. How do we confirm any of this?” Sam breaks the tense silence. He already has an idea. He’s scared to voice it aloud.

“Only one way to check,” Technoblade almost sounds nervous. “I mean, you guys must be thinking the same thing.”

“And it sounds like something has already started,” Quackity shivers.

Everyone looks to Tubbo. His authority as president means nothing right now, they look to him because when it comes to Tommy, he is the final say.

Tubbo doesn’t know what to think, anger and horror trying to bury hope, but he doesn’t want to do this. He’s so scared of what he’ll find if they do.

“Let’s... Let’s go to—” Tubbo stops when his voice shakes again. He steadies himself. “Let’s go dig Tommy up.”

## Chapter End Notes

Technoblade confessing to seeing Tommy's death and— WHAT'S THIS?  
CONNOREATSPANTS WITH A STEEL CHAIR?

Yeah. It just made too much sense lol. Connor knows about necromancy and was canonically living in Tommy's house while he was exiled. Other than that he has 0 emotional investment in the story.

more on flower meanings— Tubbo was bringing oxeye daisies to Tommy’s grave, those are the ones that symbolize patience. As in the original flower pairing, the one Tubbo left for Tommy and Dream brought him, was oxeye daisies and cornflowers which represent hope for the future, it basically said “hold on a little longer, hope is coming.” And in this chapter, Tubbo casts the oxeye daisies aside. He threw patience away. No more waiting. Hope is coming.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

TW: Tommy is not well. Low self worth and outcomes of manipulation/long term abuse

This is a bit shorter than some of my other updates, but you guys got me all hyped to work on this fic I'm having way too much fun :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's an eerie procession. By all rights half of them didn't need to be there, but no one could walk away without knowing. They had yet to decide who would actually do the unearthing. Ranboo keeps close to Tubbo, staring down at his memory book with persisting anxiety.

There's dirt stuck between the pages, trapped close to the binding.

Ranboo's dread only grows.

His memory was *bad*, but say some more knowledgeable part of him had chosen to dig up the grave, how could he forget finding Tommy's corpse? How could he get away from that without some indication of rot or horror? Ranboo's hands are clean. Did he think to wash them before he forgot everything? He doesn't know.

He's hoping for an empty grave. They all are.

"Holy shit," Quackity almost stops as he sees the grave half unearthed. Not that he didn't believe Tubbo, seeing it in the flesh is another beast entirely.

"I told you. Someone else has been here," Tubbo mutters ruefully. He isn't looking, though. He keeps his gaze firmly away from the headstone, either watching the ground or watching the others.

"Maybe someone else had the same idea and doesn't think Tommy is here?" Sam offers.

Tubbo huffs noncommittally. He stays frozen a few yards away. He doesn't want to step any closer. He doesn't want to see what may lie in the bottom. The rest of the company has gathered in a semi-circle, like there's a boundary keeping any of them from stepping closer. Tommy's body could already be unearthed, just out of sight. No one wants to be the first to find out.

Puffy sighs, cutting the tension and making Ranboo startle. "You got a shovel, Sam?"

"W-What-? Oh, oh yeah, I should," Sam scrambles through his inventory before tossing it her way.

She gives him a look, exasperated if not understanding. "I already have a shovel, Sam. I was wondering if you would *help* me."

Sam hesitates.

Quackity grabs the shovel before he can come up with a reply. "Let's get this over with," he marches on determinedly like his heart isn't beating very fast. He had not only attended, but had been an... especially active participant in Schlatt's funeral. Seeing his shitty ex dismembered in a coffin was almost soothing. The thought of seeing Tommy, so many months after... Quackity pauses on the edge. "Whoever it was, they dragged up the flag!" Quackity has a moment of optimism, it fades into wariness in a moment more, voice quieter as he stares into the grave but makes no move to begin. "He could... He could still be down there, though."

"It..." Puffy pauses only for a moment, debating delicacy. "It doesn't smell like it would. If there was a body still here." Quackity remains on the ledge, Puffy carefully hops down into the grave, sticking close the walls. Landing on a kid's corpse is a worse than nightmarish thought. Puffy volunteered for this. She could do it. She had to. For Tubbo's peace of mind at the very least. She shifts the dirt with her shovel. She sees the blue of the L'Manberg coat.

*Come on, Puffy. Toughen up. Just do it.*

She grabs the coat, pulling it from the earth. There is no body alongside it. For good measure she shifts aside the soil further, even digging down, but there's just nothing. Puffy is as relieved as she is puzzled.

Quackity gives her a hand up out of the grave, holding the flag as Puffy holds onto the coat. Tubbo stares at her, a mixture of desperation and dread so apparent, even as throughout the grim proceedings he's tried to pretend he's just angry instead of scared.

"He's not there," Puffy cuts through the tension like a sword.

Still, silence remains. If Tommy *had* been there, the course of action would've been clear. Rebury him and hunt down the person responsible. Now, though. Uncertainty hangs in the air.

"See! I *told* you Tommy isn't dead!" They all jump, turning to face the ghost now standing over the grave. Ghostbur hums thoughtfully. "You know, I don't have one of these."

"Yep, like I said, he hasn't been there for a while, so. I'm gonna head out," Connor turns on his heels, intending to saunter away towards the prime path. Technoblade stops him by grabbing the hood of his onesie. "Come on, man, what'd you want with me?" Connor tugs away halfheartedly.

"Well, considerin' you're the last one who saw him alive, I thought we'd keep you around for a bit," Techno replies dryly, making no move to let go of him, instead pulling him closer to the group like holding a kitten by the scruff.

"No, *you* were the last person to see him alive, right?" Quackity points out.



Technoblade frowns. “No. That wouldn’t make sense—”

“Techno, if he was shot in the neck,” Phil cuts in thoughtfully. He turns to Tubbo. “And *you* are totally sure that wound wasn’t there, then maybe... Maybe he did come back. And died a second time.”

“An empty grave doesn’t mean someone has figured out a cure for death,” Techno replies irritably.

“That’s true! And not having a grave doesn’t make someone alive either!” Ghostbur adds cheerily. He pauses. “You know, sometimes I think I remember having a tomb. It was sort of like the sewers, underground, and there was... there was a long tunnel...”

Sapnap interrupts with some desperation. “Okay, but if... if Connor saw Dream bring him back. And— And Connor said they left together and Tommy seemed fine, then... Why would Dream kill him?”

“I know what I saw,” Technoblade says coldly, enough to render Sapnap silent for now.

“Where is he?” Tubbo finally speaks, voice soft and aching. He finally sounds young; young and tired. When did he get that *tired*? “Dead, alive— I don’t know what I believe, but *where is he*? I-If he’s alive then—” Tubbo feels a lump in his throat, words taken from him. “Then why hasn’t he come home? And if he’s not...” Tubbo doesn’t finish the thought. He’s still terrified he’ll start to believe in all this.

“Okay. I think... We need to figure out when Tommy died,” Sam thinks things over carefully. “Because, it could be that Technoblade *did* see Dream kill him. And he’s just dead and his body is... somewhere. But if Technoblade saw what he saw *after* we found out he was dead...”

“Or you guys could just believe me?” Connor pouts. “I literally *saw* them. Tommy got up and walked away! *After* the funeral.”

“Well, forgive us for not *just* taking your word for it,” Quackity brushes him off.

Tubbo is good at logic. He can solve a puzzle. That’s easy. Far easier than obsessing over where Tommy is now.

“Dream brought his body early in the morning. Maybe... An hour after sunrise. He—” Tubbo stops for a moment. He needs to think about this clinically. Tommy cannot be his best friend, he can only be evidence. “He had bruises and broken bones. When Dream said he killed himself, he specifically said he jumped.”

“Ponk confirmed he had a broken neck,” Sam offers. “Even if somehow Tubbo didn’t notice an arrow wound, Ponk would’ve seen it. And Puffy, you and Eret, you got him ready for the funeral, right?”

“That’s what I said. I can say with total certainty that there wasn’t an arrow wound. Unless Dream has found out a way to heal corpses,” Puffy scoffs.

“Dream said he’d killed himself the night before,” Tubbo glances to Technoblade.

“He died in the morning. Tommy was runnin’ at me a little after dawn,” Techno says.

Tubbo looks to Sam. “Did... Did Ponk estimate a time of death?”

Sam nods. “Rigor mortis had set in. It was the night before. That makes sense.”

“He could’ve shot him, waited, and then brought Tommy to you all the next day,” Phil points out.

“No,” Sam shakes his head. “That would’ve been... 24 hours, right? A body looks different. 12 hours versus 24. Ponk was pretty sure.”

“Okay, so that’s one disparity for it not being the same death,” Tubbo is trying to be unattached and rational. If it’s working, it doesn’t stop the ache in his chest. He takes a moment to think, cogs turning. “Okay. Tommy, dead or alive, he’s gone. From what you said, Technoblade, and you, Connor. Dream has him.” Tubbo tries to bury the dread that raises inside of him. He needs to be a leader right now, not a mourner. “So we need to find Dream.”

~

Dream is getting tired of Tommy finding ways out. He had worked so hard to build his museum— a museum that hadn’t even been *meant* for Tommy— but it had served its purpose. Dream didn’t want to start over fresh. If he had to, if word had gotten back to Ranboo— the *real* Ranboo of course, the one that was fully him, not that naive little puzzle piece walking around befriending L’Manbergians— then that could pose a challenge. Dream could move Tommy again, it would just take some planning. Maybe he’d take Tommy far underground. Or underwater, so no more Endermen could find their way inside.

Dream is really just biding his time. He *knows* where he wants to put Tommy. There’s just one thing standing in his way. One person.

Dream hadn’t yet made his Warden.

Sam is a smart man. Wherever Fran is, she’s tucked away and safe. Dream could always go after Ponk. Or even just by threatening to kill Tommy maybe he could get Sam to fall in line. His power had to be absolute, if Sam found the courage to try and get help from the others, his security crumbles. Really he just needs to get Sam to divulge the complete security plans. He has most of them, he helped plan them, but access codes and keycards, those were Sam’s area of expertise. Although, even knowing the plans, Dream knows the maintenance of the prison would be a lot of work, work Dream doesn’t have time to do. He should’ve had Sam build the prison further from the mainlands of the SMP.

Dream had no intention of wasting his prison, but he can be patient when he needs to be. Until he has the right leverage, it would sit empty and he would find another vault to keep Tommy tucked away in. Still, Dream wants to know. He wants to know if the prison is ready, if Sam might be more easily breakable than he thinks.

***You whisper to Awesamdude: Hey Sam! I'm ready for that prison tour if you're up for it?***

Ten minutes of silence, Dream growing more impatient.

***Awesamdude whispers to you: Sure thing Dream. Could you meet me outside the prison in say, an hour?***

Dream stares at the message with a frown.

***You whisper to Awesamdude: any way we could do it now? Im not far from the prison***

***Awesamdude whispers to you: I could meet you by the main Portal in 30 min if that's easier.***

Dream huffs irritably.

***You whisper to Awesamdude: okay see you there***

Dream waits idly, circling the prison. It's imposing, satisfying. He also knows there's enough empty space inside that if he wanted to expand, move his library here as well, he could. Sam is the only wrench in his plans left. The L'Manbergians are broken down and grieving, Technoblade has enough wary respect to keep his mouth shut, George and Sapnap are distant enough they aren't breathing down his neck and his goings on, and the rest of the server is hardly a threat, and Dream's museum grows more complete by the day. Dream can't help but feel proud. So many shifting parts, and he's managed to balance them beautifully. Ironically enough *Tommy* had been the most annoying as of late, that mental break he had is the closest thing to a challenge Dream has faced in months.

Dream watches the sun and his communicator. It's been thirty minutes. He begins walking towards the main portal.

Sam appears through the swirling sheet of purple and walks down to meet him.

"Sorry about that, Dream. Took me a minute to get here," Sam is cordial and apologetic. "I'm glad you reached out. I was thinking of messaging you myself. It's ready. And I think you'll be impressed by the end result." He begins walking back the way Dream had come.

"I hope so," Dream smiles behind his mask, watching Sam, reading him. He's so naive. The great redstone engineer lets his passion show no matter how exploitable it is. He let his feelings for Ponk have some semblance of openness, stupid enough not to see the target that puts on Ponk's back.

"Yeah, actually, I've... learned some things that might be of interest to you," Sam continues carefully. He looks past Dream towards a bench on the side of the hill.

Immediate caution. Dream doesn't reach for his sword yet, but he considers it. Instead he keeps his voice level and calm. "Oh?"

"Yeah, so. Tubbo and Ranboo found Tommy's grave all torn up the other day," Sam says every word with measured weight. "I thought that might be... *significant* to you."

Dream is silent for a moment, nothing given away from behind a mask. “Why would grave robbing be significant to me?”

Sam pauses, considering him in turn. He nods over the cliffside, directing Dream to the torn up grave below. “Tommy is gone. His body isn’t there.”

Dream doesn’t react beyond stepping back from the fence along the ledge. “Hm. That’s horrifying. Why would someone *do* that?” Dream sounds appropriately disgusted. Sam doesn’t trust it for a second.

Sam can’t reveal what he knows and from whom, Dream is perfectly capable of hunting down Connor or whoever else and silencing them permanently. “I mean, you’re the one who found Tommy’s body. You’ve been seen... around the grave on occasion. And...” Sam hesitates. This is a precipice that once crossed cannot be stepped back from. “I think you know more about Tommy’s death than you let on.”

Dream’s hand twitches for his sword. He doesn’t grab it. “What’s that supposed to mean, Sam?” He grows colder, more dangerous.

“Look,” Sam shifts from foot to foot. “I’ve been doing research, and I’ve been thinking about the prison, why you had me build it, and I think I’ve figured something out.” Sam is more comfortable exposing Technoblade, who has a better chance than anyone of taking Dream on. “Technoblade said he saw Tommy get shot. In the throat. Tommy didn’t die from a crossbow, Dream. We saw his body, he clearly killed himself.”

Dream takes a step forward, standing toe to toe with the towering creeper hybrid. “What’re you trying to say here, Sam?”

It takes some willpower for Sam not to step back. “I’m saying you brought Tommy back to life. You took him away from here.”

Dream chuckles, low and calm. “That’s a... pretty big accusation, Sam. And an absurd one at that. You’re hearing yourself, right? *Brought Tommy back to life*, yeah, did I resurrect Wilbur Soot while I was at it?”

“Don’t think I’m scolding you, Dream,” Sam’s tone changes to one more passive. “Just stating the facts as I know them. And I think... Well, you built the prison for a reason. If you need somewhere to put Tommy, I could take him off your hands for you.”

“Your optimism is touching, Sam, really, but you’re not gonna take a *dead kid* off my hands. He’s six feet under over there. Or at least he was and should still be. I’m not exactly worried about him going anywhere.”

“Now, we both know Tommy isn’t dead,” Sam doesn’t miss a beat, continuing on confidently. “That was clever, stops people looking for him. But in the prison, no one could even *try* and get to him. So, you bring him to the prison, even tonight, when no one’s around. That’s one more problem solved. Let me do my job.” Sam is laying it on thick, even as it makes his stomach turn.

“Hm,” Dream is assessing him behind that mask. “Wish I could. Can’t do anything for someone who’s dead, right?”

“Well, do you at least want to see the prison? It’s finished now,” Sam steps forward as Dream steps back.

“Not today, Sam. I’ll see you around, though, okay? Take care of yourself and... remind yourself how to let go of the dead,” Dream gives him one last nod, pausing before he turns around, heading for the portal at a quick walk.

Sam feels a jolt of panic, feeling like he’d failed in some way. His job hadn’t been to hold Dream singlehandedly, but he should’ve been able to stall longer. If Dream gets through that portal, he’s gone. He’ll disappear and take Tommy with him.

<Awesamdude> *main portal*

He types it out shakily, wasting precious seconds as he walks after him quickly. Sam hates to admit it, but he cannot fight Dream, definitely not alone.

Then Dream starts running.

All caution abandoned, Sam sprints after him, scrambling for his crossbow, heart beating in his throat. Sam steadies his crossbow and fires.

~

Tommy probably shouldn’t get bored this easily. Months with *nothing* and Tommy almost feels more trapped here. Then again, in the void he could walk as far as he wanted. Here, Tommy paces like a caged animal, which to be fair isn’t an inaccurate description.

“Fucking Dream leaving me here alone...” Tommy needs someone to talk to, even if it’s just himself. “If Dream *were* here, though, that’d be scary too.” Tommy stops pacing. He stares at the narrow stream of lava blocking the doorway. “I miss Wilbur.”

Tommy could do it. Burning to death can’t *really* be much worse than what he’s gone through already. He could see Wilbur. Unless right now Wilbur is alive in here somewhere. Tommy considers shouting. No. Dream would never keep them that close together.

Dream also explicitly told him not to kill himself. The last time he had disobeyed a direct order from Dream had been talking to that Enderman. He doesn’t plan on reliving those consequences any time soon. It’s not fair. He should be able to see Wilbur. Dream doesn’t just kill him, he makes it so he doesn’t even get to see his dead brother. Wilbur’s words return as loud as before, rising up against his bidding and infecting his every thought, a warning and a curiosity all at once.

*You know you don’t deserve this, don’t you?*

Tommy grabs one of the empty books, sitting on the floor near the lava, the warmth calming. He’d normally talk something like this through, but as of late, his thoughts had been harder to

grasp, his mind more addled. He'll write it down instead. He needs to piece *something* of all of this together. Wilbur, Dream, any of it.

"Okay... Okay. Guess I'll start with... good stuff? Right?" Tommy hesitates over the page.

*-Heals me when I get hurt*

*-gives me food and has since the start of exile when I couldn't hunt enough*

*-gives me a say in how I die*

*-tried to make it hurt less*

*-apologizes when he has to hurt me*

*-hugs me when I do something right*

*-always comes back when he says he will*

*-forgives me when I mess up (doesn't hold a grudge)*

*-gave me somewhere nice to live when he didn't have to*

*-let me go outside that one time even though it wasn't a good idea*

*-let me listen to a disc*

*-back when I was dying by accident he brought me back to life*

Tommy hesitates, muttering under his breath. "Dream brought me back to life when I died just from being stupid. Early on I should've stayed dead but he saved me, and he says that... well, I owe him my life for that, don't I?"

Old words resurface and make him shiver, *you owe me your life a hundred times over. You owe me everything you are. Your life is mine. Got it? You are mine.*

"I'm supposed to be dead right now, and I'm only not 'cause of Dream, so... *does* that mean he owns me?" Tommy frowns, mulling it over. It's a dark tunnel Tommy really doesn't want to go down right now. "Fuckin' focus, Tommy. Think of... list of the bad things, eh?"

He flips to the next page.

*-hits me a lot*

*-takes food away*

*-kills me*

*-when he gives me a say sometimes I say no and he does it anyway*

*-put me in that dark room for a long time*

*-killed Mushroom Henry*

*-he hurt Wilbur (idk how but I know he did)*

Tommy underlines those last two a few times.

*-he won't let me leave*

"Not like anyone gives a shit about you outside of here anyway..." Tommy stares down at the list gloomily. It doesn't feel like enough. The good or the bad.

The list of the good is longer than the bad. That scares him. Maybe he just isn't trying hard enough.

*-hurts me really bad when I mess up*

"When you mess up... fuckin' idiot, *obviously* he's gonna hurt you when you fuck up..." Tommy doesn't cross it off, but it feels weak.

*-Wilbur says he shouldn't hurt me like this*

*(Wilbur also killed himself to get away from you)*

Tommy feels a lump in his throat. He's not going to break down over something like this. Wilbur had also been trying to help him these past months. Dream had brought him back to keep them apart. Well, that's what Wilbur said.

"Really, Tommy? You're gonna start believing Dream over Wilbur, hm?" Tommy drags the quill against the obsidian floor. He'll need to burn this book before Dream gets back. It seems like something Dream would get angry about.

*-he's a stupid asshole in that stupid fucking smiley mask. He's a green bitch and we went up against him in the first war. We put up a good fight he doesn't have the right to fucking boss yuo around now.*

Tommy feels a mixture of flighty panic and mischievous joy. It's nice to feel excited instead of just terrified by doing something he's not supposed to. Still, Tommy quickly scribbles it out. Too dangerous. He flips back to the page of good things. He doesn't know what would come out of him if he tried to make similar lists for Wilbur. Not that it matters, as he knows, he doesn't *have* Wilbur. He only has Dream. The list of good things is longer than the bad, but the bad stuff feels *really* bad. This was just a way to pass the time. It's an illusion, acting like weighing the good or the bad matters, like he's ever had a choice or ever will.

~

Sam fires, aiming for the legs, a dead Dream would be of no use to them either. There's a spray of blood as Dream tilts forward and the bolt is embedded in the blackstone steps up to the portal.

He missed.

Sam, a better engineer than fighter, scrambled by fear, at a run, but he can't help but hate himself for it. He grazes Dream's leg enough to draw blood, but not even enough to slow him down. Dream is still running.

Dream is at the portal. Sam failed. Dream is going to escape and Tommy is going to suffer all because he missed one shot. Sam doesn't stop running, he'll run through the portal if he has to, even if he knows by the time he gets through to the other side Dream could disappear in any direction. He has to try. He can't live with himself if he doesn't try. Before he can make some other desperate attempt, another shape steps through the portal, a sword cutting through the swirling plane followed by a towering figure with Netherite armor and a pig's face.

Technoblade blocks Dream's path with a sword.

"Hey there, Dream. Where're you goin' in such a hurry?" Technoblade laughs dryly, smirking at his old rival, he takes another step forward. Dream takes a step back, looking over his shoulder where Sam has quickly caught up. Maybe Dream could try and fight Technoblade alone, but Sam has a crossbow level with his back, and he sees the other little L'Manbergians and their allies circling, all with weapons drawn and the determination of people on a rescue mission. So many faces, some even old friends as he sees Sapnap close to Quackity. Dream can't run away from this anymore, nor can he fight them all, but even with such odds it doesn't matter. Whatever they do to him he'll just do to Tommy a hundred times over.

## Chapter End Notes

;D

(idk how obvious I've made it but the implication is supposed to be Enderboo checked Tommy's grave before going where that Enderman sent him to find Tommy)

Also. I've begun making Content for this fic on my tumblr [here](#)!

Including a [sad web weaving](#)

And a bunch of [John Mulaney memes](#) I've had saved for weeks. I think I'm funny lol.

Yeah, thank you guys sm for all the comments on the last chapter!! I've had this stuff planned almost since the beginning of this fic, like, since I started working on it months and months ago, and we're finally getting to the Big Stuff!! :D



# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

TW ! This chapter includes new parts of Dream's journal, which means dehumanization, human experimentation, and referencing violence/potential triggers from previous chapters. To avoid this, just skip the journal parts which are marked out in italics, and know the gist is just Dream is horrible. Nothin new there.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream drums his fingers on the table, still wearing a mask and somehow he manages to have the audacity to seem bored. They have his weapons, his armor, his tools, a gathering of potions, and a couple books. Dream had been especially reluctant to a search, but it's not like he had a choice. Dream stares at the mirror across the room, knowing they're assessing him from behind it.

"So, what now?" Ranboo asks nervously. Through the one way mirror, through the mask, and Ranboo still feels like the man is staring right at him.

"Who do we send in to talk to him, then?" Sam asks, arms folded over his chest.

"I'll go."

Everyone looks to Tubbo with the same uncertain doubt.

"What?" Tubbo grows somewhat defensive.

"You're too..." Quackity looks for the right word.

"You better not say nice, Big Q. Not for him," Tubbo snaps.

"No, I wasn't gonna say that, man," Quackity laughs nervously. "I was thinking more like, emotionally involved?"

Tubbo pauses. He sighs irritably. "What do you suggest, then?"

"Well," Quackity glances to Sapnap.

"Uhh that doesn't exactly sound less emotionally involved, Quackity," Technoblade drawls.

"Wait, *me*?" Sapnap blinks in surprise. He pauses as everyone stares at him, hands fidgeting in front of him. "...I dunno if that's a good idea."

“I mean, that, or you, Technoblade. The one person he might actually respect,” he nods to Technoblade. “Or the only person he might actually still like,” back to Sapnap.

“Yeahhh I’m only proficient in, uh, *advanced interrogation techniques*, and I thought that might make some of you guys uncomfortable,” Techno raises an eyebrow.

“Fine, I’ll talk to him,” Sapnap says quickly. “We don’t... I know what you saw, Technoblade,” he glances to Puffy. “I know he’s changed, but... maybe he’s got... an explanation? Or something?” He tries weakly.

“Fine, be my guest,” Sam sighs, taking him out into the hall. He’d finally given Dream that prison tour he wanted. Straight to an interrogation room. “We’ll be able to hear you, you won’t be able to hear us. So if you want out, just say so.” Sam swipes a keycard.

“Thanks, Sam,” Sapnap murmurs, stepping into the room with some anxiety.

“Sapnap!” Dream greets him, offering a wave, making the chains around his wrists rattle. “I’d give you a hug, but I can’t exactly move at the moment,” he tugs at the bindings keeping him to the table.

“Yeah...” Sapnap stands at first, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. “Look, dude. I gotta... I gotta talk to you about some stuff.”

“Go ahead,” Dream nods. “You don’t...” He pauses, tilting his head, assessing his old friend carefully. “You don’t believe this stuff, right? The ‘I killed Tommy and brought him back to life magically’ story Sam was telling me?”

Sapnap glances back to the mirror as if expecting support. He only sees his own anxious expression and Dream’s white mask. “I don’t... I dunno. I just wanted to... talk to you about it.”

“Okay. You can. I have nothing to hide. Although, to be fair it’s because I don’t *know* anything about all this,” Dream leans back in his chair, utterly at ease. There’s a pause, Sapnap turning away from the mirror, at least not feeling alone. “They’re watching us,” Dream nods to the mirror, giving a wave. “What’d they tell you to say to me?”

“Um. Nothing,” Sapnap hesitates for another moment before sitting down. “They just want me to talk to you. To... figure out what’s going on, I guess.”

Dream sighs. “Your guess is as good as mine. I know me and Tommy weren’t exactly buddies in the end, but I went out there to check on him when I could. And then he killed himself. And it was horrible. That’s all there is to it. All I could do was bring his body back.” Dream sounds weary. “Didn’t expect *this* to be the thanks I get.”

“Well... Technoblade saw you kill Tommy,” Sapnap continues to fidget, hitting his knuckles against the edge of the table and only looking down. He knows he won’t be looking his best friend— his *old* best friend?— in the eye through a mask but he doesn’t want to look at him either way.

“Yeah, *Technoblade*, the guy who helped Wilbur blow up L’Manberg, whose last interaction with Tommy was basically *telling* him to die, he’s always seemed like he’s had Tommy’s best interests at heart, right?” Dream scoffs.

“I mean... *you* haven’t seemed like you’ve had Tommy’s best interests at heart...”

“No, obviously not. That kid made it his mission to be a thorn in my side up until the day he died, and apparently even after as it seems like *everyone* wants to continue his legacy of getting in my way,” Dream grows more bitter. He pauses, shaking his head. “Sorry, guess it’s not good to speak ill of the dead.”

Sapnap nods, not fully paying attention, rather lost in thought. “You... You exiled him because of George.”

“What?” Dream takes a moment to catch on. “Oh, yeah. I did.” Dream hesitates, unsure of where Sapnap is going with this.

“And you took George off the throne not long after.”

Dream sighs, irritated. “Someone made an attempt on his life, and he didn’t seem especially enthused by the position, so. It’s my job to keep him safe.”

Sapnap frowns, brow furrowed. “When was the last time you talked to George? I know you haven’t talked to *me* in... a while.” Sapnap pauses, an understanding dawning. Dream has been further away from him than he’d first realized. It had slipped his notice, but now as he looks at the man across from him, wearing the same mask as his best friend, all he can do is wonder how much Dream is lying to him right now.

“I... I don’t know. I’m not especially popular with L’Manberg, so I guess it just made more sense to keep my distance from the mainlands for a while,” Dream shrugs. “I’m sorry if I’ve seemed distant.”

Sapnap doesn’t know how he knows, but he feels it burning alongside the fire in his heart. Dream doesn’t mean it. That feeble apology— It’s barely an excuse. He’s been cutting him away as well as George for so long and only now, locked away, does he indicate that their friendship meant anything.

“I... I don’t think I can do this,” Sapnap murmurs, bolting to his feet. He turns back to the mirror, speaking up to the glass, “uh, Sam? I want to get out of here.” Sapnap turns away from the mirror to face the door, anything to avoid looking at that smiling mask. As he waits for Sam, the tension feels like a stretched band ready to snap any second. Sapnap doesn’t say a word. Dream doesn’t either.

Then he’s out of that room and it’s like he can breathe again.

“You okay, babe?” Quackity is with him in a moment more. “You look a little... freaked.”

“Huh? Yeah... Yeah, I’m good,” Sapnap almost seems surprised to have someone speaking to him, but he accepts Quackity’s offered hand anyway. Quackity still looks at him like he’s

expecting more. Sapnap turns to face the group. “He’s not right. Sorry I wasn’t... I don’t know what I was hoping for, I guess. He’s not... I don’t know if he’s my Dream anymore.”

“Thanks for trying. Sorry if I pushed you into it,” Quackity gives his hand a squeeze.

“It’s okay. I think I needed to.” Sapnap turns to Tubbo. “Sorry I didn’t... I didn’t know what to ask.”

“It’s okay. Didn’t expect you to,” Tubbo stares at the glass and the man sitting calmly through it. He just keeps staring, like he can find Tommy if he looks at that mask long enough. “I let that bastard speak at his fucking funeral,” he mutters.

Ranboo lingers by the table on the other side of the room where Dream’s belongings are gathered. There are two books among the usual armaments. He picks one up, flipping it open.

Ranboo drops it with a shout, jumping back as it bursts into flames, paper curling and burning in an instant until there’s nothing left. It burns and in its wake leaves behind a static in the air, a feeling of ozone like something incredibly powerful had just fizzled out aimlessly. All eyes turn to Ranboo and the source, now nonexistent on the table.

“I... I do *not* know what happened. It just... it just burned. I didn’t do anything, it just...” Ranboo stares at the table where he’d dropped the book with wide eyes.

“It’s okay, Ranboo. You couldn’t have known,” Sam frowns, going over to the table. The book hadn’t left any residue, no ash, no nothing. Sam has a lot of experience with fire and explosions and mechanisms, but he’s never smelled fuel burning like that, nor known it to leave almost static burning through the air. It makes him think of charged creepers, *maybe*, but even then. Nothing like this. “No one touch the other book for now. Maybe I can figure out a way to save it. It only burned when you opened it?”

“Yeah, I didn’t get the chance to read it, it wasn’t in english, I don’t think,” Ranboo still stares at the table, at the other book like it tempts him. He doesn’t grab it, though.

“There’s... There’s blood on the pages. On the side of that one. I can just barely see it, but I’m pretty sure that’s not dark red ink.”

Sam stares at the other book as well, dread rising.

“Techno?” Quackity turns to the towering figure behind him. “Your turn?”

“Uhhh I’m not exactly a *people person*, Quackity. Why do you think this’ll be helpful?” Technoblade shifts uncomfortably.

“You’re the only person he might at least respect,” Tubbo points out. He sighs, looking up at Technoblade without fear, only weariness. “Apparently I’m too emotional to do this, so I’m asking you. Whatever our differences, not for me, but because it’s the right thing.”

Technoblade stares back, like he’s assessing him.

“Techno. You saw what happened to Tommy, this is important,” Philza offers his own soft encouragement.

“Okay, fine, *fine*. I’ll talk to him,” Technoblade grumbles.

Technoblade enters the room with far less hesitation than Sapnap, but agitation is still apparent, albeit more socially awkward in nature.

“So, Dream. You, uh. You sure hate Tommy, huh?” Techno takes a seat, sitting up straight, hands folded on the table.

“Well, yeah, we didn’t exactly get along when he was still alive, but I consider myself above hating a dead man. Not worth my time,” Dream shrugs. “So, what, they decided to send you in next to... verify whatever little story you’ve told them?”

Technoblade snorts. “Yeah, *story*. The blood you left on my lawn is definitely just a *story*. Lowered my property value, by the way. Not that you’d know much about that. You don’t *have* a house, right?”

Dream grows more irritated. “I have a *house*—”

“Yeah, yeah, sure whatever helps you sleep at night,” Techno waves him off, nerves fading as he starts to have fun. “So, you shot Tommy. Everyone else here seems pretty sure he killed himself. You wanna make that make sense to me, Dream?”

“Why would I kill Tommy? He was exiled. Now, if he *broke* his exile and tried to go back to civilization, then I might’ve killed him,” Dream shrugs, now with the audacity to try and seem bored. Every word is pointed based on what he and Technoblade both know. The same excuse he had given before he dragged off Tommy’s bloody corpse.

“Why’d you kill him, then? My house is definitely not L’Manberg,” Technoblade says pointedly. Dream scoffs and gives no reply. “Hmm, you know what? *I* think you’re actually scared of that little brat!” Techno laughs.

Dream doesn’t react beyond the slight tilt of his head. He doesn’t even seem frustrated, more genuine puzzlement. “What? No. I wasn’t out there, checking in on him through all of his moping, because I’m *scared* of him.”

“Oh? Then why *were* you out there?” Techno teases.

“To keep an eye on him. I told Tubbo I would!” Dream nods to the mirror behind him, looking through it like he can stare Tubbo down that way.

“Uh huh. Yeah, that sure sounds like you. What’s your *real* reason, then? If you’re not *scared* of him,” Technoblade continues to try and press the right buttons.

Dream leans forward, finally reacting significantly in some way, but it’s still not irritation, he’s *smug*. “No, no I’m not scared of him. Maybe I just think he’s *fun*. ”

Technoblade is momentarily frozen. He doesn't get up and leave, but he can't think of a single retort to offer to that. "That's... uh, that's messed up," Techno refuses to look away, to show any indication of intimidation, because Dream doesn't intimidate him, but there's definitely something wrong with him. "So. You carry around books. Do you wanna tell me why?" Techno tries a change in subject, unsure and gruff.

Dream sits up straight sharply, almost leaning away from Techno. "You've read it, then? So... why're you here talking to me?" He grows more cautious in an instant, like he's expecting something more like retaliation, all that pride exchanged for wariness.

"Uhhh," Techno fumbles for a reply. "I don't know, it sorta *combusted* before we could read it."

Dream processes this carefully as well, nodding slowly. "Right. Maybe it's because I don't want people snooping through my books. So... you only opened the one?"

"Uh. Yeah. We're not tryin' out the other one. I mean, unless you tell me whatever you used to boobytrap it," Technoblade leans forward conspiratorially. "Which, actually, I recommend. It would score you some brownie points, could getcha out of here."

Dream laughs, tension fading. "Right... right. Well. You should just leave the other one alone too unless you want another lightshow."

Tubbo turns and grabs the other book immediately.

"Tubbo! Hold on, we don't know—" Puffy quickly tries to stop him as he opens it.

There's no flame.

"He wouldn't have talked about it like that if this one was trapped too," Tubbo almost feels excited. Until he reads the first page. Whatever triumph he felt dies. He flips to the next page, brow furrowed.

"What's it say?" Quackity asks.

Tubbo doesn't reply, flicking through pages quickly.

"What is it, Tubbo?" Phil steps closer, like he wants to put a hand on his shoulder before thinking better of it.

"Give him a second to read," Puffy waves them off even as she watches Tubbo anxiously.

Tubbo continues for a few more pages before throwing the book back on the table like he's been burned. He's gone white. "I can't read it— can't— I can't focus enough, the words get messed up. Can someone—?"

Quackity reaches out for the book at the same time as Ranboo. Ranboo looks at him, something behind his eyes almost pleading.

"Let me," Ranboo says softly. Quackity backs off, an understanding met between them.

Tubbo turns back to the wall of glass, one hand balled into a fist and pressed to his mouth, the other defensively across his chest. He's trying to stop his shaking. "Out loud, if you will," is all he says, voice trying to sound calm but there's a tremor anyway.

"Should we... Should we get Technoblade back in here for this?" Sam asks hesitantly. All eyes turn to Tubbo once more.

"I don't care," Tubbo says curtly. He still stares through the glass, like he can look through that mask and into Dream's empty heart.

"I'll... Just hold on a second, Ranboo," Sam heads back into the hall. Tubbo watches through the glass as the door opens and Sam waves Techno into the hall.

"Going so soon?" Dream still has the audacity for snarky humor.

Sam nor Techno entertained him with a reply.

"What's happenin'?" Techno reenters with mild confusion. "Oh. You got the book open. Cool. Wasn't sure if you'd caught that," he nods. "So, have you read it?" He looks at Ranboo, who holds the book, but has resolutely refused to look down at it.

"Ranboo? Do you still want to do this?" Puffy asks gently. "You don't have to. I could, if you want?"

"No, no I'll read it. I... I should," Ranboo can't explain it. He found those words in his journal, he found the torn up grave, he had written letters to Tommy in exile. Until he stopped hearing back. He has to do this.

"Right, guess I'll... I'll start wherever Tubbo left off?" Ranboo glances at them all.

"What about the stuff he already read?" Quackity asks.

"No," Tubbo says sharply. "Not again— You'll catch on. No point in prolonging it, surely."

"Oh— Okay. I'll... I'll just start, then," Ranboo finally looks down at the page. He just needs to read it, not think about it. He cannot think about it. So he reads.

*"He ran. He was smart, I broke his leg so he wouldn't run and he killed himself to get it fixed."*

Just from this beginning it's clear people want to interrupt, to question it, to express their horror or disbelief. Silence holds out for now. Ranboo continues.

*"It takes a lot of willpower to drown yourself in the shallows, probably more likely fear. I didn't even realize he was running until he was already in the trees. I got him with a spectral arrow. Maybe I've been making him stronger from hurting him, because he kept running with an arrow in his side. He actually surprised me. I couldn't shoot him down. He must've had a plan because he went right to Technoblade. That's a problem. He shouldn't have the ability to plan against me. He actually almost made it out. That would've been a real nuisance. I don't know if I could've convinced Technoblade to give him back to me and that*

*fight would've complicated things. I did catch him though. At the last second I shot him through the throat so he'd stop screaming before he could beg for help or tell him anything. It was a good shot. Didn't matter if it wasn't a clean kill it was more important that he couldn't talk--*

Technoblade is the first to break the horrified lull of a captivated audience. "Told you he killed him!" This results in several looks his way, some surprised, some offended. Except for Tubbo. He refuses to face them. He's only looking at Dream. Techno shifts uncomfortably under the attention. "Sorry, uh. Keep going."

Ranboo takes a deep breath. He's getting shaky. He can still read it. *"Technoblade seemed alarmed but not suspicious. Even if he disagreed with it there's nothing he can do for a dead kid. He let me take his corpse back, listened when I told him not to go poking his stupid pig snout in things. He knew better than to try and take a moral high ground or anything."*

This garners a few more dirty looks Techno's way. Techno breaks the silence once more. "I mean, what was I supposed to do? I wasn't gonna *rescue a corpse.*"

Ranboo ignores him, continuing on resolutely. *"Tommy can't stay here anymore. I'm taking him to the museum--"*

"Wait, wait, *museum?* You mean like, *Eret's* museum?" Quackity interjects next.

"It just says museum," Ranboo says tiredly. He gives Quackity a weary look. Quackity returns to silence sheepishly. Ranboo continues.

*"I'll keep him dead while I get things set up, I didn't have a cage for him in the hall obviously but the prison won't work yet until I fix the Warden--"*

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean? *I* was supposed to be the Warden-- What's there to *fix?*" Sam cuts in now with some panic. Everyone looks at him but no answers are offered.

"I just want to get this over with. So, please just let me read," Ranboo sounds annoyed and exhausted, not looking up from the monstrous story in his hands. This is hard enough as is.

"Sorry," Sam steps back.

Ranboo manages to continue.

*"New plan to focus on obedience training. Make sure this doesn't happen again. Does mean a loss of natural deaths because I'm not going to let him out any time soon. I'll leave him to rot for a few weeks as punishment. I'm pretty sure he's claustrophobic so it should definitely be effective."* Ranboo buries a shudder. He is not quick to anger or hatred, but loathing is growing louder within him. He can't even imagine what Tubbo must be feeling right now. So he does as was asked of him. He reads on, words shaking, the occasional stammer, he persists either way. *"He can't be stupid enough that he'll try and run again after this."*

*"He came back mute from the death wound. Arrow to the throat, so makes sense. May be permanent. See if he can talk next time he's brought back."*



*“Returned to body after about twelve days. I can only estimate, but I think he’s only been dead for half of that. Cell smells like rotten flesh. Wasn’t sealed in completely because I didn’t want him to suffocate (too quick) so I was worried about bugs but I think the cave is closed in enough they didn’t get to him. He hurt himself a lot, his hands are all bloody and I think he hit his head against the wall too. There’s a surprising amount of blood, but I think thirst is still what killed him.”*

Ranboo pauses, feeling like he’s going to be sick. He’s scared if he opens his mouth again something else will come out. There’s more. He has to keep going. They’re all waiting for him to continue.

*“The god stopped showing up early on, but Tommy gets brought back either way so it doesn’t matter.*

*Severely dehydrated on return. Voice is back, though, he started screaming when he woke up. He barely cried, though, but that might just because he’s weak and thirsty—”* Ranboo stops, inhaling shakily. His cheeks are burning. He drops the book, quickly trying to wipe tears away. “S-Shoot, I’m sorry, I just need a minute—”

Philza steps up beside him, brushing away the tears before Ranboo can burn his hands as well. “S’alright, mate. It’s okay, just breathe. You can stop.”

“B-But it’s not *done* yet, I have to—” Ranboo shakes his head, even as he tries to bury sobs. Phil shows him this tiny bit of caring and it’s enough that his facade shatters.

“I can keep going, Ranboo. It’s okay,” Puffy offers gently. Ranboo hesitates for a moment more, glancing to Tubbo who, after looking back to make sure someone was helping Ranboo, had returned to staring Dream down. It’s hard to tell what he’s thinking right now.

Ranboo caves. “Fine, fine, if you can.”

“I can, Ranboo. Don’t worry about it.” Now Puffy picks up the book, skimming the page to where Ranboo left off. She winces. *“He fucking disobeyed me. I bring him back, I’m actually NICE to him and he leaves the cell when I told him to stay put. I had to keep playing nice even when he was whining and cowering and basically begging me to kick his face in. He doesn’t trust it right now. But that’ll change. It’s a few weeks of me being benevolent and kind for him to go back to being a loyal little idiot. I’ll still hit him.”*

Quackity looks like he wants to scream or maybe punch a wall. He just keeps holding Sapnap’s hand, tight enough that it hurts, but Sapnap doesn’t mind. Sapnap is busy hanging onto every word, trying to comprehend any link between what is spoken and the man in the other room.

*“As long as it’s only when he does something he knows is wrong, and I can’t actually beat him into the ground because he’ll think that was unfair. I let him get away from me. I lost restraint and just did what I wanted to him. I can fix him when his body breaks but if he remembers how to hate me that’s harder to go back on, but not impossible. He’s so starved for any affection or support it’s like giving an addict a drug.”*

Sam goes towards the door like he's intending to leave before stopping himself. Unlike Tubbo, he resolutely refuses to look towards the window into the cell.

*"Once I've fixed him I should be able to continue with my experiments. I have an idea to reduce pain. Or at least to make him think I'm trying to reduce pain. Mostly I'm just curious to see if it'll work."*

*"New rules. I didn't tell him the rules directly because that gives him too much time to think about them and convince himself they're unfair or whatever whiny pathetic logic he follows. But I know how to do this, Tommy will learn from experience. When he says the wrong thing, when he talks back or is demanding etc. it's a slap, and when he's disobedient I'll take away food, when he tries to go somewhere he shouldn't it's to the cell (going outside without permission maybe just a day, going to nether without me needs at least a few days in the cell no food or water. Blatant escape attempts will require something special. If he tries to run again maybe I'll blind him. I don't want to cut off his legs because carrying him from place to place will get annoying)–"*

Puffy takes a deep breath, pausing. Her hands are shaking. Everyone looks at her once more, waiting like one waits for a time of death. Puffy grits her teeth. She's stronger than this.

*"I am going to be systematic about this. If Tommy knows there's a way to obey, that there are rules he can follow, he should be more inclined to behave. I was too random before. I hurt him whenever I felt like it, always found a reason of course, but I was inconsistent. It was probably confusing for him. He disobeyed because he knew he'd get hurt either way. If this system doesn't work I'll try increasing the punishments and having stricter rules (threaten to s-sew–"*

Puffy stops once more, paling further. She glances up to Tubbo. "I– I don't know if I should continue."

"It's okay, Puffy. I could... I could take over?" Sam offers. Puffy knows he's praying she'll say no.

"I just don't know if this is– if this is something we should be hearing. It doesn't help us actually find him, does it?" Puffy asks. "Tubbo?"

"Please, keep going," Tubbo doesn't face her. He sounds so calm it's eerie.

Puffy obliges. She still wonders what kind of damage this will do to the people listening in this room, she supposes it doesn't matter compared to the damage done to Tommy. She picks up where she left off, steadier now. *"(threaten to sew his lips shut for speaking without first being spoken to, break a leg when he goes anywhere without me/my permission, if he disobeys an order or even hesitates it's a beating, no food or water for the day) hopefully it won't come to that, the stricter I am the more effort it takes to convince him I'm his friend. He's so desperate for my approval by now I could probably just say I'm disappointed in him and he'll fall apart. I don't think my plans as of will ruin the friendship I'm building with him. As long as there's clear cause and effect and reasons for punishments he should know it's his fault–"*

“His *fault?*” Quackity hisses under his breath.

*“–Behavior has already improved. Resumed experiments. Tried severing the spinal cord. I don’t think he believed me when I said I was trying to reduce pain. He couldn’t feel anything but I think the severing was bad enough that it didn’t matter. Have to bring him back quickly when he dies. Wilbur is a problem–”*

Phil sits up. “Wilbur? What do you mean, Wilbur?”

*“I... I don’t know yet, just– Let me keep going,”* Puffy waves him off, Phil forces himself to settle, but this feels louder to him somehow. *“Fills his head with dangerous ideas. This is delicate. All it takes is one relationship outside of me and he forgets how merciful I’ve been.”*

“Fucking *merciful?*” Quackity bursts out, struggling to keep quiet, but Puffy just keeps reading.

*“I’m curious about bleeding. His body heals itself, so there aren’t multiple corpses left over, but he seems to regrow blood like he would heal a wound. There’s blood everywhere. Moved experiments to a separate room with a drain, but it’s intriguing how much of it builds up after so many deaths.”*

*“Got more answers about limbo. It takes time to find others. He described it in his usual bullshit Tommy way so it’s hard to understand it, talking about trying to get to people with his heart or feelings or whatever, something like that. Garbage. I’d assume he just means wanting to get to someone–”*

“So, so he means Wilbur in the afterlife, has Tommy *seen* Wilbur?” Phil can’t help himself. Puffy pauses, but she has no answers to give. “I’m sorry, you should... you should just go on, I’ll stop.”

*“Wilbur has been handled. Next step is to work with long term deaths. I’ll start strong. See how a body restores itself in resurrection after it’s experienced more significant decay.”*

“Okay, but what does that *mean?* ‘Wilbur has been handled’?” It’s Quackity’s turn to fuss over the dead revolutionary.

“I don’t *know*, okay?! I just– Let’s just get this over with,” Puffy snaps, growing more irritated by the second, silencing Quackity immediately who slouches away from her, guilty.

*“Rotted enough now. It only took 9 days. I left it outside, so the wildlife helped. Not a pretty sight. There’s a lot more to repair than usual. The death wound was relatively nonviolent for this one (pickaxe to the skull) but the decay process left way worse holes in him. I wonder if the dead maggots will come back to life too / if I’ll need to do some work to remove them. I doubt he would heal over with them still there, but if it does I’ll just keep cutting into him until they’re all gone. Getting the corpse back to the cell was disgusting, but he hasn’t earned seeing sunlight again so I couldn’t revive him out there.”*

Puffy pauses again, she keeps reading like she's searching for an ending. *"All signs of decay including the insects have been removed. They were rejected the same way resurrection pushes a weapon out of a wound. Even the scent of rot faded significantly. I was worried he'd come back blind, because of what happened to his eyes (I'm guessing some of the insects burrowed in to make it that bad) but they came back fine—"*

Puffy stops, she sounds like she's choking. "No— just, *no*. I-It goes into more detail, b-but I can't— Oh my god— I *can't*." She shoves the journal across the table like it's a dead thing. "Jesus *Christ* I can't *read* that—"

"It's okay, Puffy. You did what you could," Sam puts an arm around her.

Quackity flips through the next few pages, stopping when he gags. "T-There's a few more pages, but like, nothing about where he might be or anything." He looks to Tubbo.

Tubbo finally turns around. His arms remain folded over his chest and he stares resolutely at the ground. "Thank you, Puffy. And Ranboo. You can stop now. I'm sorry for putting you through that."

Tubbo is calm, almost diplomatic, as if he's acting in this matter as a president and not the family of the victim. "Give me a moment to think about how to proceed."

They all stare at him, without a clue of how to respond to this. They feel like they should offer Tubbo comfort, but it's like Tubbo has left his soul behind, other priorities consuming him. He's being utterly logical, no emotion at least shown. Quackity shivers. It reminds him of Tubbo's cold anger when he exiled Tommy.

Sapnap silently takes the book from Quackity, flipping through the pages like somehow the words will change. It's *his handwriting*. That shouldn't surprise him, but Sapnap stares down at the pages and it's his best friend's words spilling out violence, undeniable and cruel.

"Dream won't tell us where he is without... serious incentive," Tubbo begins slowly.

"You mean like... you mean like torture?" Quackity immediately jumps to the right conclusion, however dark. This time Sapnap doesn't protest.

Tubbo nods.

In another circumstance, more than a few people in this room might've protested such an immoral proposition. No one does. Not with that book open on the table. No one says a word.

"Well! I said I'd be willing to try some *advanced interrogation*, so. Let me at him, right?" Techno breaks the tension almost cheerily. Techno is adept at hiding his feelings, using snark and humor in the worst of times. Now is no different, even as thousands of voices scream their rage against the inside of his skull, Techno gives a facade of arrogance and uncaring.

Tubbo doesn't respond at first, still thinking. "I want to talk to him."

This time none of them can bring themselves to tell him not to.

“Oh, now they send in the *president* to talk to me,” Dream jeers at his arrival, leaning back in his chair. “What’re *you* gonna do to follow up Technoblade? Although, to be fair, he felt more like an awkward parent-teacher conference than a blood god.”

Tubbo doesn’t know what’s happening to him. He’s burying so many parts of himself, searching for anger or grief or fear inside his heart and instead there’s just something so *cold*. He read that first page and it’s like his soul turned off.

“We read your notes, Dream,” Tubbo sounds so flat, a Judge speaking to a defendant, nothing more.

Dream had responded with something more like fear when he thought Technoblade had read the journal, but *Tubbo*? Dream doesn’t even move. He speaks softly, smug and cruel, “did you find something you didn’t want to see?”

Tubbo is wired like a spring, jaw tense. He feels nothing and in the same moment a need to tear this man to pieces.

“I don’t think you understand the situation you’re in, Dream.”

Dream sits up, leaning forward, Tubbo doesn’t flinch. “No, I don’t think *you* understand. You’re going to let me go. Because if you don’t, Tommy is going to suffer even more. You can keep me chained up all you want, *I’m* still the one with the hostage,” Dream snarls.

A moment of harsh silence, the two of them staring each other down, waiting for someone to break.

“Okay, sure. You have Tommy hidden away somewhere,” Tubbo says it mildly, like Dream has merely taken a favorite sweater instead of a friend. “You’re still *here*, aren’t you?” Tubbo smiles, like some eerie pantomime of the anxious boy who had served under Schlatt’s presidency. “So, until I do decide— or don’t— to let you go, you’re at my mercy, aren’t you?”

Dream laughs. “Oooh, Tubbo, you’ve gotten *bold*, haven’t you? You must’ve realized by now, anything you do to me, I do to Tommy a hundred times over.”

“Okay, that, or we break you to pieces, you tell us where Tommy is, and maybe I let you live,” Tubbo bites back easily. “See, I’ve survived without Tommy for quite a while now. I’m in no rush.”

“Is that so?” Dream tilts his head, assessing him, smug and unafraid. “I think you might want to get some urgency, then. You know the longer I’m here the worse Tommy is suffering *right now*?”

“Any worse than what you’ve been doing to him already?” There’s some more edge to Tubbo’s voice now.

Dream sighs, perfectly at ease. “You’re going to let me go, Tubbo. Otherwise Tommy won’t get fed, right? You want him to hurt *more*? I left him with water. All that means is he can prolong his death for weeks. That sounds *agonizing*, don’t you think?”

“I think Tommy will forgive me for a few days while we dissect you like a fucking rat,” Tubbo tries to remain cold, more than rage bleeds through.

“You’re *confident* now, aren’t you, Tubbo?” Dream is so patronizing. “You really think you can get me to give up my most valuable asset in just a few days?”

Tubbo’s anger sparks in his chest. *Most valuable asset*. “Tommy is stronger than you. I can break you in a matter of *hours*.”

Dream’s cool smugness fades into irritation. “Look, don’t doubt me on this. You read the book, you know I’m not messing around. The longer you keep me here the worse he’s going to suffer. Whatever you do to me until then, I’ll do to Tommy a dozen times over, got it? So if you think you can torture me enough to get information in, what, 72 hours? That’ll probably be when the hunger starts to get *painful*. Go ahead and try. Eventually you’ll have to let me go, the longer you wait, the more pain he’ll be in, and if you *do* try torturing me, that doesn’t change that you’ll break down eventually. You know what comes next. Don’t worry, I’ll feed him first, but *then* I’ll do whatever you’ve done to me to him. Make sense?”

Tubbo wants to rip that stupid mask off and shove it down his throat. He hates that he doesn’t move against this man because he’s *right*. Any move he makes against Dream is all the more likely to fall back against Tommy, which leads to the far crueler truth in all of this.

Dream is right. They’ll have to let him go eventually. They cannot bet on breaking Dream down before then, and the moment they attempt it, that starts a harsh score against Tommy should they fail.

They cannot bet on victory in a matter of days.

“Let’s say I humor you, and we don’t torture you,” Tubbo will give nothing away. Not just yet. “What will it take for you to give him back of your own volition?”

“Huh,” Dream laughs, seeming surprised. “I didn’t think you’d be willing to put a price on your precious best friend.”

“You said he’s your hostage, then what’s the ransom?” Tubbo pushes on, ignoring his taunts.

“Oh, *Tubbo*, you have nothing to offer me,” Dream leans forward, patronizing like a cruel school teacher. “I’ve defeated death itself. What’ll you give me, diamonds? Maybe your country? *Worthless*.”

Tubbo bites the inside of his cheek, struggling not to at the very least hit the man. Whatever he does, he’ll be doing to Tommy in turn.

It’s what Tommy would’ve wanted.

Tubbo flips the table, tipping Dream back and sending him to the ground, wrists bent painfully by the chains, his head hitting stone sharply. Dream gasps, a the very least thrown off.

“Huh. I guess you... guess you don’t care about Tommy as much as I thought,” Dream struggles to get the edge of the table to stop crushing his ribs, Tubbo makes no move to help, circling so he’s standing over him.

“You want Tommy to be your... your *labrat* or whatever it is you think you’re accomplishing,” Tubbo begins, staring down at that mask with cold contempt. He could step on the man’s throat, crush his windpipe easily. “What about a trade?”

“A *trade*?” Dream is caught off guard once more. He underestimated Tubbo on principle, and this pathetic excuse for a president keeps being unexpected.

“Yeah. A trade,” Tubbo hesitates a moment more. “If you want a labrat, you take me instead.”

A moment of silence, and then Dream is wheezing. Hysterical, giggling laughter knocks the wind out of him. Dream feels like he can’t breathe, tears forming in his eyes, he’s unreachable in his mania, he can’t get himself to speak or even look at Tubbo staring at him so *serious* and genuine.

Tubbo remains stoic, staring down at the pathetic villain at his feet and wanting nothing more than to crush him. Let’s see him laugh with a knife in his ribs.

It takes minutes more for Dream to calm enough to reply. “Oh, you’re *serious*.”

“I am,” Tubbo already knows what the reply will be, he just doesn’t understand why. It’s like Dream’s mission is to irritate him alongside all the other suffering he’s caused. “I’d take that as a no, then?”

Another halfhearted laugh. “Yeah, that’s a *no*. Maybe you’re not so bad, Tubbo. You sure are funny.”

Tubbo can’t stop his voice from trembling slightly, he wishes it were only from rage. “Do you *really* hate Tommy that much?”

“*Hate* him?” Dream scoffs. “I wouldn’t say I *hate* him. Not anymore, at least. I’ve put too much work into fixing him for that. No. You’re just *boring*, Tubbo. You’re a pawn. You like chess, don’t you? Playing with just *pawns* is no fun.”

There’s violence behind his every word and it sinks its teeth in to Tubbo without mercy. Tubbo knows every retort bubbling up with bile and fury will only amuse Dream.

“So, that’s it? You want *him*, and nothing else. And nothing we do or say will get you to give him up?” Tubbo wishes his voice would stop fucking shaking, it’s a slight tremor, hardly a weakness, but it’s still too much vulnerability to give the man at his feet.

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Tubbo nods, gritting his teeth. “Right. Got it.” He leaves at a quick walk.

“Nice chat, Tubbo! I’ll be waiting here for you to return my things and send me on my way,” Dream calls after him.

Tubbo returns to the rest of his party. They stare, having heard it all. Tubbo looks each of them in the eye like he’s looking for answers, hands fidgeting restlessly. “We have to find him,” is how he begins. No one agrees nor disagrees, they just wait for him to continue. “But Dream— He isn’t wrong,” Tubbo cringes, the words sour in his mouth. “This needs to happen fast, or Tommy could— h-he could starve to death. If that happens, we’d *still* need Dream to get him back, and it means he gets really hurt.”

“He’s already hurting. I mean, it’s either he’s basically immortal and under Dream’s thumb forever, or he has a few more bad months until he dies,” Techno offers.

All eyes turn to him.

“I— I know that makes logical *sense*,” Tubbo stares at the ground now, looking almost panicked. “But I can’t. I *can’t* let that happen.” A painful silence. No one has any comfort to give, but no one can blame him either. They’re all just stuck.

“So... what do we do?” Sam looks around at all of them. They all turn to Tubbo.

Tubbo can’t handle this. He’s supposed to be a president, he’s supposed to be strong, but *this*? Is he really supposed to be a leader right now? How can he make the tough calls about his best friend?

*You managed just fine when you exiled him.*

Tubbo almost wants to scream. He wants to break down and sob and finally fucking *grieve*, he’s a kid. He’s supposed to be a *kid*. Why won’t anyone let him be?

“Well, if...” Ranboo breaks the eerie silence and all eyes turn to him. He stops himself. He hasn’t shared anything about his Enderwalk state before. It feels dangerous, forbidden. He doesn’t know if he’ll even be able to help. “So, I wrote ‘find Tommy’ in my memory book and I don’t remember why, what if... what if we figure out how I knew to write that?”

Tubbo takes a step towards him, fear exchanged for desperation in an instant. “Could you do that? Is there a way to trigger your memories?”

“I— I don’t know,” Ranboo takes a step back, his memory book held close to his chest. “I could... I could see if any Endermen might know anything...”

“You... You *talk* to Endermen?” Sam stares at him, eyebrow raised.

“N-Not much, like. I don’t really have a *community* there, but... Endermen are nice if you’re respectful,” Ranboo mutters, staring at the ground.

“Is this...” Quackity looks at all of them. “Is this *enough*? Like, can we bet on this shit to find Tommy? No offense, Ranboo,” he adds quickly. “It’s just... we *have* him,” Quackity points emphatically to the glass. “He’s *right there*! I say we start picking the fucker apart until he’s puking up coordinates.”



“And if you’re wrong?” Tubbo asks, turning from Ranboo to Quackity. “If you’re wrong, and we torture him for a week, and we *know* Tommy is starving and we let him go. You’re gonna live with everything you did to that bastard happening to Tommy? Are you really gonna take a knife to his skin knowing every scar you make Tommy gets too?” Tubbo is so cold and unwavering. It’s terrifying how he changes in a heartbeat from someone so scared and desperate to someone utterly unrelenting.

Quackity wilts in an instant, but he doesn’t give up just yet. “If we let him go now, and he takes Tommy and disappears, are we really gonna be able to live with ourselves knowing we *had* Dream and let him go?”

“Dream won’t break.” Sapnap still stares down at that evil book, now closed on the table. All eyes now turn to him, but he pays them no mind, expression reading like some weary middleground between betrayal and grim acceptance. He looks up, glancing from Quackity to Tubbo. “Trust me, I... I don’t know him like I thought I did, or maybe I never knew him at all, but when Dream commits to something, he doesn’t give up. He’s pushed through broken bones and concussions and getting stabbed just to win a fight. If that’s what he’s like when losing just means... y’know, like, losing pride, then I think he’d push through anything for something he cares about this much,” he nods to the journal. “Not someone, ‘cause I don’t think he gives a shit about Tommy. But he cares about *this*,” Sapnap taps the worn leather cover, disgust evident. “So. I don’t think torture is gonna work. I don’t have any solutions though, either,” he shrugs.

“Why don’t we have someone follow him?” Puffy offers. “He’s slippery, but we find someone, someone other than all of us, because I think he’ll get tipped off if one of us isn’t there when he leaves, we have that person follow him with an invis potion.”

“And what if they lose him?” Phil asks.

“Not like we’ve got much else to go on,” Puffy says dryly.

“Fair point,” Phil says. “What about Ghostbur?”

“*Ghostbur?*” Quackity looks at him quizzically. “To *follow Dream?* D’you really think you can trust him with something like that?”

Phil shrugs. “He’s good at being invisible.”

“And if he forgets what he’s doing and stops to make smalltalk with Dream?” Techno trusts Phil’s judgement in most things, Ghostbur— and in that same vein Wilbur— is not one of those things.

“Okay, then who do you all want to get involved in this?” Phil asks exasperatedly.

“Do we drag Connor into it again?” Technoblade snorts.

“What about Fundy? He’s good at being a sneaky guy,” Puffy offers.

“He’s also off in the desert somewhere,” Quackity sighs. “You know, how about Punz? We might have to pay him, but he does good work. And if things do get messy, Punz might even have a shot holding Dream off until we can back him up.”

No one has a counter argument.

“Punz is smart,” Tubbo agrees. “Can you reach him?”

“Yeah, he’s a fucking hermit half the time, but I could find him,” Quackity nods.

“Right. Guess all that’s left is...” Tubbo trails off.

“To let Dream go,” Ranboo finishes for him quietly.

“Yeah. That.”

Punz was willing from the beginning. Once the job was explained, once he was told about what Dream had done, he agreed to do it for cheap, not free, but still, from Punz that was like charity.

Tubbo had one more bargain to make.

“We’ll let you go. We’ll even let you live,” Tubbo says coldly.

“Aw, how generous,” Dream sighs, bored and tired. His head hurts.

“But we’re keeping your stuff.”

“Like hell you are. If you steal my stuff maybe I won’t feed Tommy for a few days when I get back,” Dream snaps.

Tubbo had expected that. “Fine. You choose. I’ll either give you your stuff back, except for the journal, or we keep your stuff and you get your precious book back.”

Dream seems to mull it over. He has armor and weapons hidden all over the server.

“Fine. I want my book back.”

“Of course you do, you sick fuck,” Tubbo scoffs. It’s not like it matters. Phil and Techno had been transcribing a copy word for word as plans were made.

It’s strange to see Dream outside without armor. He rubs his wrists irritably as Sam shoves him forward. “The prison is mine, now, by the way. In case that wasn’t obvious.”

“Sure thing, Sam. You wanna give me my diamonds back, then?”

“No.”

“Alright, you’re free. Now fuck off,” Quackity interjects.

“No, actually. Hold on a minute,” Dream takes his time, looking at each of them carefully. “I know you’re a bunch of weaklings, but you gave up *easy*, even for you. So let me make something clear– If I’m followed, I am going to cut off his legs, and while I’m doing it I’ll be sure to tell him it was because of you people,” Dream says it slowly, like he’s issuing instructions. “And don’t worry, I’ll be sure to kill him too, that way when you’re torturing me or whatever to make me bring him back, you’ll still have to deal with the fact that even if you *could* get him back from me, he’d be damaged forever and it’d be your fault. You guys took my notes, didn’t you? So you should know limbs don’t grow back, so don’t fucking test me.”

No one has a retort. They hadn’t read that far. Tubbo wants to strangle him. The odds are against them, but only just. If Dream is followed, Punz could surely hold him off to protect Tommy until they could get there. They don’t know where Tommy is. They don’t know *how* Tommy is. For all they know, Punz won’t be able to follow Dream all the way. All it would take is a stasis chamber like the prison and Dream disappears. There are too many factors, and too much truth behind Dream’s threat. Everyone glances to Tubbo. They don’t know what call to make. Dream starts walking away, he’s *leaving*, and soon Punz will be on his tail. They’re running out of time.

“Ranboo?” Tubbo asks quietly once Dream is out of earshot. “Do you really think you know something?”

“I... I don’t know. I just... It’s just a feeling, you know? That I can figure this out, but... I don’t want you to stake Tommy’s life on that,” Ranboo says, soft and imploring.

Tubbo doesn’t look Ranboo in the eyes, but he’s still trying to read him somehow. “I think your feeling is all we have to go on, now.”

*You whisper to Punz: ABORT! Do NOT follow him.*

*Punz whispers to you: ?*

*Punz whispers to you: why*

*You whisper to Punz: He was going to hurt Tommy. Like irreversibly if anyone followed him.*

*Punz whispers to you: I wouldn’t have gotten CAUGHT im not an amateur.*

*You whisper to Punz: Couldn’t take that chance.*

*Punz whispers to you: im still getting paid though right*

*Punz whispers to you: kidding*

*Punz whispers to you: let me know if you need a gun for hire whenever you guys actually figure out how to rescue Tommy. Im there*

They’re back to square one. They lost their only bit of power or intel, and perhaps worse, they let Dream go right back to Tommy.

## Chapter End Notes

**Dream: this year we lost our dear friend Tommy**

**Tommy: QUIT TELLING PEOPLE I'M DEAD!**

**Dream: sometimes I can still hear his voice**

half this chapter I've had planned for months, the other half feels very rushed :/

eh. we're one step closer to progress! (or are we just back to square one...). Regardless, thank you guys for the lovely feedback as always. Sorry to give y'all hope just to take it away, but we're making progress. New ideas have been coming to me about how this is gonna go down so some stuff got pushed back a chapter. Life has gotten busy again, but I'll try not to leave you guys hanging too long <3.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

TW: references past violence, character death. c!Dream being c!Dream. And human experimentation! (hybrid experimentation? who knows) oh, and gaslighting and suicidal thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy knows it's been more than a day. Dream *said* he would be back tomorrow. Maybe it just feels longer somehow. Unlike limbo, at least here Tommy can measure time by hunger. Although, he doesn't really get hungry that much anymore. Or he's always hungry. He doesn't know. He's just so fucking *bored*.

He's scared too. He doesn't want to consider it, but some part of him wonders if Dream is even coming back.

"Okay. You die of thirst here, you see Wilbur, and that's— that's *fine*," Tommy paces irately. He's been doing this for a long time now. His feet are starting to hurt. "O-Or you don't die of thirst, you fucking *starve*— or wait! We could— We could jump in the lava. That might..." Tommy stops his pacing, tugging at his hair. "But that'll hurt so bad. A-And—" He paces again. "Dream said— he told you *not* to kill yourself, so—" He almost hits the wall before remembering to turn. He's not used to walls stopping his pacing. "But if he's not coming back— if he doesn't come back, what's the point? O-Or do we wait a few days?" Tommy shakes his head. "*Fuck*. H-He hasn't forgiven you, he *hasn't* you knew this was going to happen he's still *f-furious* with you, of course he wasn't gonna stop—"

Tommy chokes on his words, feeling a sob rise in the back of his throat.

"I don't wanna be alone, I can't be alone I don't want to be *stuck* here—"

Tommy screams, flinching back at the sound of redstone clicking. It's a quiet thing, harmless, and it scares him like a firework going off. Tommy presses himself against the far wall, heart racing, he stares with wide eyes as the lava lowers. This is exactly what he wanted but he's terrified all the same.

Dream returns and looks unchanged, Netherite armor gleaming, mask giving nothing away. Tommy had been close to tears already. This pushes him over some precipice that he can't tell if it's happiness or fear. Before he can decide, he stumbles forward and hugs Dream tightly, holding onto him like he's going to disappear.

"I'm sorry— I'm so fucking sorry— I— I didn't— I— I dunno I'm just so sorry," he rambles, eyes shut tightly.

Dream is frozen for a moment before grabbing onto Tommy's arms and pulling them away. Dream is cold in an instant, holding onto his wrists and not letting go. "Why are you sorry, Tommy?" Dream steps closer so Tommy stumbles back.

"I- I d-dunno I- F-From talking t-to the Enderman a-and- I t-thought-" Tommy is growing more frantic. "I t-thought you said you forgave me b-but you were *gone* a-and you weren't coming back s-so I thought- I'm sorry," Tommy flinches, waiting for Dream to hit him.

"So... you haven't done anything?" Dream doesn't let go yet. "I *told* you I wasn't still mad at you. Why'd you make it seem like you got into trouble again?" Dream scoffs, finally letting go, instead placing a gentler hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, Tommy. I said I would come back, and I did."

"B-But it's been *days* I thought you said tomorrow but it's been--"

"What're you talking about, Tommy?" Dream silences him in an instant. "I told you I'd be back tomorrow, and now it's today. I came back when I said I would."

Tommy stares at him, looking almost ill. "Felt... felt longer..." He doesn't understand. Why was he so *hungry* then? Why had it felt *so long*?

It hadn't felt that much longer, he supposed. Two full days instead of one. Maybe he just got panicked for no reason.

Dream tilts his head, turning Tommy so he faces him head on. "You... you doing okay there, Tommy? You look a little... out of it."

"I-I'm fine. Sorry," Tommy shakes himself. It shouldn't matter. No matter how long it had been, Dream is here now.

"Okay, good," Dream steps back. Tommy puts a hand on his shoulder where Dream had let go. He's so starved for affection it's almost painful. "No experiments today. I've got some stuff to do, I do need your help, actually."

"Y-You do?" Tommy hesitates before following. "But... it's not experiments."

"Nope!" Dream heads upstairs to the brewery. "You're gonna go through these potions for me. You're gonna organize them. I want you to narrow stuff down based on priority. Try and put together the most important ingredients. You have experience with that from your *drug van* days, don't you?"

"You want me to do... fuckin' housekeeping?" Tommy scoffs.

"Yeah, I do, Tommy," Dream grows annoyed in an instant. "Would you rather I have you do something *else*?"

"No! No, this is fine," Tommy says quickly.

"Good. When you're done, come back to the library. Don't get into trouble," Dream pats him on the shoulder and leaves him to it.

This shouldn't make Tommy nervous, but he doesn't trust it. It's too... harmless. He's hungry too. He was hungry before Dream returned and he's still hungry now. Tommy knows better than to ask for things so frivolously, but maybe if it gets really bad he'll ask Dream if he can eat something. Tommy is already emaciated, soon he won't be functional.

Until then, Tommy does what he's always done to survive this; as he's told.

He spends too much time stressing out over what's important or not, but he's done it. Enough at least. The real reason Tommy decides he's done is fully motivated by food. He's finished his work, he's done a good enough job, maybe that's enough to earn some bread or something.

Dream is still in the library, leaning over his desk, staring not at a book but rather a massive map. There's a second, smaller map beside it as well as a list with numbers on it. Tommy steps up closer, curious in spite of whatever fear he should have. One string of numbers is circled.

-7345.892 / 65.341 / 4841.266

Coordinates.

Tommy can't think of a single thing of value that far out. Not anything Dream should be interested in, anyway. So it probably isn't something he would know about.

"Tommy," Dream turns sharply when he notices him, shuffling his papers together, the sheet of coordinates disappearing among the maps. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, I get it you're *sorry*. You're always sorry. You could try not screwing up instead," Dream is still irritable. It's almost like he's *sensitive*, acting out of wounded pride or anxiety.

If anything it makes Tommy more scared of him. He's unpredictable at the best of times, who knows what he'll be like now. Tommy's nature had yet to be fully beaten out of him. He's still brash and he doesn't think things through, he's also still curious. "What're you looking for?"

Dream steps to the side, blocking Tommy's view of the table. "This doesn't concern you, Tommy."

"Right, er... what now?" Tommy has no idea what to do with himself without Dream. He needs orders.

"Go through the bookshelves. But *only* these three shelves right here. Stay away from the rest," Dream says sharply. "Put them into neat stacks so they'll all fit in one chest, got it?"

"Okay, Dream," Tommy is quick to do as he's told. Dream seems to be in the mood where he's just waiting for an excuse to punish him for doing something wrong. Tommy is halfway through this task when he realizes something, with dread and maybe something more like

hope. Dream has him *packing*. Packing like they're going somewhere— no, packing like they're *running*.

That means Dream is running *from* something.

And Tommy thinks he knows where.

Fuck. He hadn't thought to memorize those coordinates. He *needs* them.

Tommy quickly finishes putting away the books, standing as quietly as he can. He steps closer, trying to see under Dream's arm to his desk, if the paper is visible. He gets closer. No— the paper is underneath the smaller map.

Tommy is more than terrified. He's made desperate attempts before, and Dream has made sure he's paid for it before. Tommy shouldn't have any bravery *left*.

He finds some anyway. Tommy reaches past Dream and picks up the smaller map. *Negative seven thousand three hundred and something, and positive four thousand eight hundred and something. Okay. Negative seventy three, positive forty eight. That's two numbers, you can remember two numbers—*

That was all he could get at a glance, because Dream shoves him back and to the ground. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He snarls.

*-7300 and 4800. The other bits— maybe -7340 and 4830 or something?*

"I— I w-was just— I'm hungry, is all. I thought— I j-just wanted to see if I could have food or something," Tommy doesn't stand up, instead just shifting away from Dream, pressing himself against the bookshelves.

"What do you think gives you the right to take things that aren't yours?" Dream towers over him, stepping closer as Tommy tries to get away.

"Take things..?" Tommy frowns, before he realizes he's still holding the smaller map. "Oh! Oh, sorry, Dream I was just— I was just curious," he glances down at the map. "It's a... a map of the Nether! You don't really see those, eh?" Tommy holds it out to him.

"You should know better by now," Dream snaps, taking it back. He still stares down at Tommy, assessing him. "You're trying to figure out where you are, aren't you?" Dream asks, utterly cold. "What, so you can tell your little *Enderman friend* to pass it along?"

"N-No what the fuck are you talking about, I couldn't have— And it's not where we *are*, it's where we're *going*, innit—?"

"Don't talk back, Tommy!" Dream cuts him off with a harsh kick to the ribs. "*Where we're going*," Dream scoffs. "Why the hell do you think you need to know that?"

Tommy curls into a ball, the wind knocked out of him. Dream really *is* scared. Worse— he seems to think he's growing out of control. Not a bad thing, normally, but right now nothing feels more dangerous.



Tommy doesn't reply. Dream is just waiting for a reason.

-7340. 8400. *Wait, no, fuck, 4800. Focus.*

"Yeah, that's what I *thought*, Tommy. Shut up and stay down if you know what's good for you," Dream turns back to his maps. It's strange, Dream is agitated and clearly wants to take it out on him, but he also has other priorities so he actually leaves Tommy alone. Tommy doesn't know what to make of it. This isn't Tommy's priority right now either. He needs to get this information to *someone*. He needs help. Tommy cannot wait around for another fucking Enderman to show up. If people might be coming *here*, that means he could... he could leave a message for them somewhere? Tommy has no idea where he would hide it where Dream wouldn't find it.

There's only one person he could ask for help. Getting to him means dying, and soon.

-7340. 4800. *Oh, this is gonna fucking suck.*

Tommy can still feel the pain of broken bones like an echo from the last time he fucked up. Tommy must be well and truly insane to risk something like that again. Although, that *did* get him to Wilbur. At least until Dream brought him back again and was careful not to let him die. The *first* time he was careful not to let him die too, fixing a punctured lung by stabbing a blaze rod between his ribs. Tommy didn't know breathing could be so agonizing, ever inhale burning, still never enough air, like drowning in fire...

*You have fucking coordinates, Tommy. And no clue what to do with them. If he's taking you somewhere, this is your last fucking chance.*

Tommy has a plan, not a good one, and most definitely not a painless one, not to mention whatever consequences Dream will enact when he's brought back, maybe Tommy has lost it if he's still really looking for help from a dead man, but it's better than waiting around for whatever Dream has planned next.

Two options. He waits until Dream sends him away to another task, and then he goes upstairs to the pool of water. He's drowned before. Drowning isn't that bad. But there's every chance Dream isn't going to send him anywhere unsupervised any time soon, not after he caught Tommy snooping. In that case, Tommy would need to run for it. Not for the portal, of course, but he could make it to the pool of lava before Dream can catch him. He's really weak now, but he can run, surely. That, or Dream grabs him, hurts him for being suspicious. Tommy doesn't even know if Dream will be distracted enough for him to make it to the door, let alone upstairs. Maybe if he just waits Dream will put him back in his cell and he can use the lava there. Or Dream might already be pissed enough to put him in the *other* cell. Tommy has found the willpower to do terrible things to himself, he isn't so sure if he'll be able to kill himself with literally nothing.

Tommy wants to ask if he can go back to his room, Dream would lock him in, and then he can throw himself in the lava. Dream is not in a charitable mood. If Tommy asks for anything he'll get denied it out of spite.

Tommy had forgotten how terrifying it is to act on free will. These are his decisions to make and his consequences to bear. He just wants someone to tell him what to do, to give him an order. He'd been a good soldier, hadn't he? He'd been a good soldier *because* he'd disobeyed orders when he had to. Tommy isn't even sure if he's capable of that anymore.

Tommy slowly gets to his feet, watching Dream closely.

*-7300. 4800.*

Tommy takes a single side step towards the door, watching Dream for any sign that he's noticed. Dream doesn't turn around.

*No matter what when he brings you back he's gonna be fucking pissed.*

If Tommy takes another step, surely Dream will notice him out of the corner of his eye.

*You've got to run. He will chase you. You just got to keep moving. You know where the lava is. Just run. Don't think about it, you'll have to move fast, you'll have to jump.*

*Don't think about how bad it's gonna hurt.*

Tommy takes off running.

He scrambles up the stairs two at a time, his chest and legs already aching as he forces his weak body to move faster. He scrambles to turn the corner into the corridor sharply, slowing down as he slams his shoulder into the wall as he passes it.

He hears Dream coming behind him, but he's not right behind him yet— Dream must've thought he was going for the portal.

*"TOMMY!"* Dream is still too close behind.

Tommy rushes to the room with the lava, but the corridor feels longer somehow, like it's stretching out in front of him, Tommy almost stumbles, charging ahead anyway. It's a prey instinct, driving him forward with adrenaline well practiced. He's been hunted too many times. Finally, he sees the glowing pool, bolting through the doorway, and for a split second, he hesitates. He can *feel* Dream right behind him, reaching for him. Tommy dives forward towards blinding light and blinding pain.

~

"Well. Alright then, Tubbo. You just lost us our only bit of leverage. You're bettin' a whole lot on Ranboo's memory, you know that, right?" Techno turns to him doubtfully.

Tubbo's stomach feels like it's twisted in knots. "Yes."

Techno glances to Phil. He sighs. "Well, alright then. Come on," Techno tugs on Phil's sleeve, nodding towards the main portal.

"Where are you two going?" Quackity calls after them.

“Logstedshire. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but *no one* has bothered to do any investigating since we found– or, I guess *didn’t* find– Tommy’s body. So. Me and Phil are gonna go have a look.”

Phil follows after him. “We are?”

“Yeah, we are. Until Tubbo figures things out, what else are we gonna do?”

Tubbo watches them go, a weight like a stone pressing down on his chest. He doesn’t know if he made the right call.

“Well, I guess we’ll...” Puffy looks to Sam. “I think we should get some more people together. If this ends up being a rescue mission, we need bodies.”

“Okay– Okay, yeah. That’s a good idea. I can reach out to the Badlands,” Sam nods.

“Cool, I’ll probably grab... Eret? I don’t know,” Puffy shrugs. “If you need *anything*, Tubbo. Just reach out,” she looks almost like she’s going to hug him, before thinking better of it.

That leaves Sapnap and Quackity beside them.

“So, what’s the plan?” Quackity turns to Tubbo.

Tubbo tries to refocus, to pull away from the spiral of dread threatening to drag him under.

“No,” Tubbo shakes his head.

“What?”

“I mean–” He looks up at them, blinking like he’s woken from a dream. He looks stronger now. “Sapnap, you have to know what kind of hiding spots Dream has, could you and Quackity look?”

“Oh, yeah I guess so,” Sapnap blinks in surprise. “We’ll... We’ll let you know if we find stuff, then.”

Then they’re alone.

“Why’d you send them away?” Ranboo asks. “You know Dream won’t have him anywhere Sapnap knows about.”

“Well, I sort of thought jogging your memory might be easier without an audience,” Tubbo stares down the prime path where their allies had disappeared. He wants to ask Ranboo if he thinks they even have a chance.

He can’t pull away from this dark spiral, not when it’s just him. Not with Ranboo. He’s so scared that he’s just signed his life away to looking for his best friend forever. Dream could disappear so fast and he could lose Tommy forever and he would be haunted by the fact that he couldn’t make the harsh call, that maybe Tommy is better off dead or horribly hurt by

Dream than trapped with him without rescue. Tubbo should never have decided that *for* Tommy but it's not like he had a choice and *everyone* kept on looking to him like he's Tommy's keeper or something or like he's—

*Your Tommy.*

Tubbo feels someone take his hand, he looks down at it, confused and startled from his dread. Ranboo is beside him, Tubbo looks up at him, looking just below his eyes.

Ranboo stares back with something almost like a smile. “We’re gonna get him back, Tubbo.”

Tubbo doesn’t know how, but somehow he believes him.

“How?” Tubbo asks weakly. “I have no fucking clue what I’m doing—”

“Yeah, well, I do,” Ranboo interjects gently.

“... You do?”

Ranboo looks almost sheepish now. “You’re not gonna like it, but you gotta trust me on this, okay?”

Tubbo squeezes Ranboo’s hand. “I trust you, Ranboo.”

Within the hour, Tubbo questions him.

“Are you... are you *sure* about this?”

“Honestly, I thought you’d be *more* reluctant to do this,” Ranboo begins to gather glass bottles from his home in New L’Manberg.

“Nope!” Tubbo sits back as Ranboo turns the water bottles into splash potions— or not potions, but splash water bottles? Tubbo is mostly intrigued. “I said I trust you and I do! I didn’t expect... *this* to be the set up.”

Ranboo hands him a splash bottle. Tubbo accepts it with some hesitation. “...And I’m just gonna splash this *near* you, right, not on you?” He looks at Ranboo carefully.

“And I’ll keep my armor on the whole time,” Ranboo repeats. He’d already given Tubbo reassurances.

“And... after that, what happens?” Tubbo asks.

Ranboo frowns, hesitating, still holding the bottle. “I... I’m not totally sure. That’s the stuff I don’t remember, so...”

“But you think you’ll be able to remember what you know?”

Ranboo nods. *I think so.* Ranboo cannot give Tubbo any uncertainty right now. *He* can’t take any uncertainty. “I will. I’m going to.”

Tubbo manages a smile. They both don't quite believe it, but they'll pretend while they can.

"Ready?" Tubbo asks.

"What, are you getting nervous *now*?" Ranboo teases.

"Oh fuck off." With that, Tubbo smashes the water bottle on the ground, his legs soaked and the rest of him splashed. He'd shut his eyes for a moment when it broke.

So he hadn't really seen it happen.

But Ranboo is gone.

"Oh god—" Tubbo stares, stunned at the place where Ranboo had stood a moment ago. "I— I just fucking killed him—" Tubbo steps back, looking around the room wildly. Tubbo jumps as another bottle slips from his hand and shatters on the floor, flooding Ranboo's home further.

"Oh." Tubbo realizes something far too slowly. It's been a long day, but surely he should've realized Ranboo's disappearance is for the same reason water burns his friend. "Enderman, right... but he can't..." Tubbo frowns. "He couldn't *do* that."

Another problem comes to mind, as the initial shock fades.

"...where the fuck did he *go*?"

Tubbo isn't sure if he should wait for Ranboo there or if he should go looking. Maybe it's just restlessness, but Tubbo leaves, looking around like he'll see a tall suit on the horizon. There's nothing.

So he goes to where he's gone every day for months now. It's different when it's empty.

*Here lies Tommyinnit.*

Wrong.

*Soldier, brother, friend.*

Not wrong.

*You can let go now.*

Definitely wrong.

"I'm not letting go of you that easy, bossman," Tubbo grabs the L'Manberg flag that had been abandoned on the ground. "We're coming. I *promise* you we're coming." Tubbo sighs.

"Just gotta figure out where the fuck Ranboo went first..."

Great. Now *both* of Tubbo's closest friends are missing.

He doesn't know who to tell. So many people would help him, Puffy had even extended an invitation, but Tubbo can't bring himself to ask any of them. The people he wants help from are both MIA.

It feels like Manberg again, he realizes with bitter frustration, staring down at an empty grave that is both his hope and his torment. He feels like everyone he had left that trusted and loved him had left him behind. *Again*. He knows it isn't like that, he knows Ranboo is coming back soon and Tommy—

Tommy didn't have a choice.

*Except when he killed himself.*

*Can you blame him? Knowing what you know, knowing what you fucking did, can you blame anyone but yourself?*

Tubbo has one thing he can do right now. He heads back up the hill towards L'Manberg, going to Ranboo's house again. He just needs an Enderchest. Tubbo pulls out a Netherite helmet, staring down at it. The front is more open than most helmets. To make room for a mask. Tubbo takes out the rest of the set. They're going to get Tommy soon, so he needs to be ready.

Tubbo returns back outside to the platforms of the city, securing the gauntlets on his arms. The armor is a bit big, but it'll do the job. Tubbo sees movement out of the corner of his eye, to a tall figure running towards him from the direction of the chess board.

"Tubbo!" Ranboo is breathless, his hands a mess of grass and mud. "I was—" He takes a deep breath. "I was really far out, I couldn't get here fast enough, I don't know how I got all the way out there, past the badlands—"

"You teleported."

Ranboo stops, mouth hanging open. "I— What?"

"I'm pretty sure you teleported, Ranboo," Tubbo repeats it slowly.

"But I... I can't do that."

Tubbo shrugs.

Ranboo looks him over, catching up now that he can breathe again. "That's Dream's armor."

"Not anymore," Tubbo says curtly. He refocuses. "Wait— Wait, what did you remember— Where the hell *were* you— Ranboo, can you find him?" Tubbo tries to grab onto Ranboo's shoulders, he can't reach so he holds onto Ranboo's arms instead, shaking him a little. "Can we get him back, Ranboo?!"

"I—" Ranboo struggles to piece things together with Tubbo so frantic. He manages a shaky nod. "I remember— I remember an obsidian room, a-and Tommy was *there*, Tubbo, he was there—"

“You mean you fucking *saw* him?!” Tubbo is shouting in his face now. “Oh my god– why didn’t you– Why didn’t you bring him home?!” He’s not trying to sound accusing, but he’s never been more desperate.

“I– I don’t know!” Ranboo pulls away, he’s never seen Tubbo like this, Tubbo finally letting go. “But that’s not– That’s not the important part–” Ranboo scrambles for his memory book, flipping to the most recent page.

On it, there’s a rough sketch of a map. A large patch of land, far East of the main server, well past the ocean, part of it is circled.

“That’s– That’s enough, right?” Ranboo almost sounds like he’s pleading with him.

Tubbo scans the page, trying to orient himself. “What’s that say?” He points to runes hastily scrawled on the margin.

“Uh,” Ranboo squints at the page with a frown, fumbling for a quill to translate. “It says... ‘in the mountain.’ And...” Ranboo swallows thickly. “And ‘hurry’. It says hurry.”

Tubbo reaches for an axe named *Nightmare*. “Message the others. We’re leaving now, whoever can arm up in the next three minutes is welcome to follow.”

## Chapter End Notes

Tommyinnit will see the phrase “out of the pan and into the fire” and go “is anyone gonna take that literally?” And Not wait for an answer.

this one is a bit shorter, and something like the calm before the storm. The next chapter is gonna be the storm.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Summary

the storm.

## Chapter Notes

the usual warnings apply! c!Dream being fucked up, implied character death, violence, threats of violence. Arguably, nothing too bad, though? If anything comes up that you think needs a warning do let me know and I'll gladly add it!

Forgive any mistakes, I wanted to get this posted and skipped out on my usual editing. This chapter ended up being 13,000 words. My chapters are usually around 4,500, if that tells you anything lol.

Here we are. At the storm. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno and Phil both know the way. Logstedshire is even more desolate than it had been previously, a small crater marring the ground beside the tattered remains of a tent.

Techno steps down from the portal, which had reappeared beside the broken one, walking forward. Something crunches beneath his boot. He moves his foot, seeing shattered and charred glass and a bent needle. Techno picks it up, careful to avoid the shards. The compass has two words carefully painted on the side, *your Tubbo*.

Beside it is a filthy and frayed green bandana. These objects hadn't been placed here by accident. They looked cast aside.

Techno puts both of them in his inventory. He knows they're not really evidence, but they feel important all the same.

"I know Tommy isn't dead, but..." Phil shivers, staring around at the eerie silence amidst old destruction. "Feels *haunted*, doesn't it?"

"Mhm," Techno hums his agreement, unable to put together a proper reply. He proceeds, stepping through ash, it's caked together into a single layer. It's rained since whatever happened here happened, so anything like footprints has definitely vanished. The ash is still unstable enough, dried now, that it kicks up grey dust with every heavy footfall.



“There’s... There’s not much left here, huh?” Phil kicks a rock down into the crater. He scrunches up his nose in disgust. Halfway down the slope of the hole is the burnt up carcass of an animal, unidentifiable after all this time.

“It’s quiet,” Techno mutters.

“What?”

“Listen. No animals, and the waves feel... muted. The wind does too.”

Phil turns back towards the sea, the waves continuing on, lulled and gentle. It’s a peaceful sort of day. It feels accusing, even purgatorial. He looks to the tattered remains of the tent. The canvas moves lazily in the breeze. He feels like it should be flapping with more urgency, like the wind should be stronger.

“Like I said,” Phil turns back toward Techno. “Haunted.”

Technoblade nods, looking lost in thought. Phil ducks into the tent, only seeing a bed, damp and soon to rot, and an empty chest.

“Speaking of haunted,” Techno begins gruffly. “You, uh. You doin’ okay, there, Phil?”

Phil steps back out of the tent, turning to look at him quizzically. “What’s that, mate?” Phil frowns, puzzled.

“Because of what we read. About... About Wilbur.”

“Ah,” Phil looks at the ground, kicking up the ash. “That.”

“Yeah. That.”

Phil shrugs, scanning the horizon, for what he doesn’t know. “It’s strange, you know? Somehow I tricked myself into thinking I was the only one left who still thought about Wil, and that made it easier, I suppose. And then I get reminded— I get reminded like *that*,” Phil shakes his head. “That he exists in the minds of others whether I like it or not. I guess I thought people fell for the Ghostbur ruse, like I was the only one who didn’t let him try and... try to fill up that hole.” Phil glances to the craters dotting the landscape. “Selfish of me. To think that me feeling guilty about killing him makes me an exception or something.”

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Do you feel guilty?” Techno repeats, no longer searching this wasteland, only searching Phil’s expression.

Phil looks surprised. “Would you... would you expect me *not* to? *I’m* the one who killed Wil.” It’s strange. He says it like Technoblade was involved in that decision as well. Considering the withers, maybe he was.

“He didn’t exactly give you another option,” Techno says dryly. “From what you’ve told me, at least.”

“Another *option*?” Phil laughs hoarsely. “I could’ve put the fucking sword down. I could’ve gotten him out of there, I could’ve—” Phil stops himself, growing too heated. He continues on more measured and careful. This is not the time to fall apart. “I could’ve helped him. I tried to get him to stop, but the moment he didn’t, the moment he made that crater... It’s like I gave up. And then he— it’s like he was trying to convince me he was beyond help. And *I’m* his dad, I should’ve known better than to fall for it.”

Techno shrugs. “Wilbur was always a pretty good actor.” It’s a weak reply. Techno has no idea how to offer comfort to a murderer, not a guilty one at least.

“I didn’t know it was gonna go like that, I thought— I knew something was wrong and I thought I could fix it and—” Phil stops himself again. “This is besides the point— what we read, that fucked up book, it... it means nothing. Maybe Tommy saw Wilbur while he was dead, maybe Dream is just being a fucking nutcase. It doesn’t matter.”

“Uh, shouldn’t it matter?”

Phil gives Techno a look. “Not right now. From what we do know...” Phil’s weariness is traded for grim determination, every word meant and felt. “Right now Tommy is someone we can save. I’m not gonna think further ahead than that.”

Before Techno can reply, they get a message on their comms.

**<Ranboo> found him. we’re leaving now meet us at the docks. hurry.**

Tommy is someone they can save now.

~

Tommy is back with Wilbur in an instant, his need to see his brother strong enough to burn for. Wilbur already looks agitated and almost unsurprised to see Tommy there, like he’s more occupied in his own goals.

“Tommy! Shit, Tommy— It’s— They’re coming. Okay? They’re gonna get you out,” Wilbur immediately hugs him.

“Wil— Please— I need help, I dunno what to do—” Tommy rambles back, hugging Wilbur back tightly.

“No— Don’t worry, it’s gonna be okay, that useless ghost—”

“Yeah that’s what I need to talk to you about, I don’t know what else to do—”

Wilbur steps back, keeping a stabilizing hold on Tommy’s shoulders. “Wait, wait, what’re *you* on about, Tommy?”

“What the fuck are *you* on about?” Tommy blusters back, defensive in an instant.

“You first,” Wilbur holds back a smirk. He’d missed teasing his brother, however grave the circumstances.

“I– You can see through Ghostbur sometimes, can’t you?” Tommy asks.

“Yeah, yeah that’s what I was gonna talk about, but... why’re you..? What is it?” Wilbur assesses him carefully.

“I need you to get some coordinates to him. Like, this is fuckin’ *desperate*, man, actually I’m gonna tell them to you now ‘cause D-Dream could take me away any second– he didn’t kill me this time, I had to do it, h-he was chasing me and shit, but I had to, these’re–” Tommy searches his memory. He wishes he had a way to write. Tommy looks down to see a thick, dark blue marker in his right hand. “Okay– Okay, here–”

Tommy’s hands are shaking so bad it takes far too long for him to scrawl out the numbers on the wall, but he manages it.

-7300, 4800

“I don’t remember anything more specific than that, but– That’s–” Tommy’s chest feels tight with panic. “H-He’s gonna take me away again– take *us* away, I think it means people are getting close–”

“Yeah, they are!” Wilbur jumps in excitedly. “Ghostbur is with Tubbo and Ranboo. I saw them– I saw them getting together boats,” he furrows his brow, trying to piece together hazy memories.

“...they are?” Tommy had had his own suspicions, but he stares, stunned, as Wilbur confirms something he hadn’t dared to hope for. It’s like it won’t compute, *they’re coming for you*.

“Yeah!”

This is too– not *easy*, but too *fair*. Rescue at *all* seems too fair. Every time Tommy has stepped towards freedom, whether running to Techno’s or trying to talk to an Enderman, the consequences always came back worse. He already knows he’s in for hell when Dream pulls him back, but he’s still trying. *Why*, despite everything, does he still *need* to fight for this to work when that shouldn’t even feel like a possibility?

Dream is going to take him away again, but if Tommy stops trying now, if he gives up and falls prey to the thought that this will remain his eternity...

He doesn’t want to be whatever Dream made of him.

Tommy shakes his head, trying to refocus. They’re running out of time. “Nah nah nah– No– This won’t– Not if he takes me away before then, so t-they *need* these coordinates– can you access Ghostbur?” Tommy grabs onto his brother’s arms, shaking him slightly.

“What? No– I’ve *tried* he hears nothing from me, *nothing*, it’s not possible–”

“I know you said that but there *has* to be a way,” Tommy already feels desperate, choked sobs rising up. It feels like he’s never been this close to making it out and he’s never been this scared. Since death became temporary, nothing has felt final. This does. *Last chance.*

“Fuck— Wait a minute,” Wilbur slips out of his hold to pace frantically. “I— Okay, okay, a few times I’ve woken up here after Dream killed me and there was— there was fucking blue ink or something everywhere,” he waves frustratedly at the air. “And that stupid ghost is obsessed with the stuff, right? I had theories, I *think* when I’m alive *he* gets sent *here*,” Wilbur says it emphatically, so much churning energy shared between them and bouncing off the walls, a bird trying to escape its cage.

“Oh— Okay,” Tommy fumbles for a plan. He pauses, “has he... has he told them about limbo?” Tommy asks weakly. He’s dreading the answer. He doesn’t want his friends to know about this place. Then again, they’d have no idea Tommy had been trapped here Ghostbur or not.

“No, no he hasn’t, I don’t think he can actually *remember* it—”

“Nah, I expect he wouldn’t, only remembers happy shit, eh?” Tommy runs a hand through his hair, tugging on it, trying to focus on anything other than his heart threatening to beat out of his chest. He doesn’t even *need* a heartbeat here, why is he bordering on a panic attack?

“What the fuck do we do, then?!” Wilbur shouts furiously at the unyielding walls, banging a fist against the tile which has refused to crack for far too many years. He *hates* feeling powerless, and he’d finally had hope that just maybe they would make it out of this, and Tommy finally returns and only has proof of the opposite. Wilbur *needs* this to work. He can’t bear knowing they’d come so close.

Tommy stares at the wall, at the blue numbers he’s written, a desperate epiphany dawning. Panic is easier, it’s familiar, as is desperation. It’s hope that has snuck in through the cracks. Hope feels like contraband, but he holds onto it even tighter all the same. He needs to push on like he knows this is going to work. He cannot continue any other way. “We make him remember.”

“Sorry, the fuck are you on about?” Wilbur turns back to face him.

“O-Okay, so— I’ll need you to die— or, wait, fuck— to *come back to life*, so Ghostbur gets sent here, and when he gets here, we gotta... we gotta make this place not scary,” Tommy gestures emphatically. “He forgets stuff that upsets him, but just being trapped in a room for a few hours... trust me, you can get used to that shit,” Tommy isn’t sure if he’s lying to himself. It’s the only plan he’s got. It feels *good* to have a plan, like he’s in control of himself, or at least like he can pretend he is. He steps back up to the wall, writing furiously, hands steadier now.

*Hi Ghostbur! You are safe. You will be home with your friends soon.*

He starts drawing something next.

“The fuck is that?” Wilbur watches him in bewilderment.

“It’s blue, innit?”

“It looks like a legless sheep.”

“Fine, I’ll fuckin’... give it legs then...” Tommy mutters.

Wilbur sighs. He follows Tommy’s logic, even if he’s more pessimistic about it working. He considers himself to be maybe not the strongest, but stronger than Ghostbur. And over the past decade he had yet to make this place more than arguably habitable. “What else does the little freak like, then?”

“Books?”

*“Books?”*

“Yeah. And... and making potions. He had a library,” Tomm speaks over his shoulder, now decorating the station walls with flowers and other drawings of animals with a dire precision. It takes focus, even to draw something simple. Tommy has forgotten how to create for himself, how to think or perform an act of his own volition. He’s forgotten how to do something without pain or fear. He fleetingly wonders if he should bite the inside of his cheek, like the sting will give him clarity.

“You should tell him to remember the numbers,” Wilbur nods to the wall before sitting down, thinking hard.

“What’re you doing?”

“Getting him books, now let me focus!” Wilbur snaps, but there’s no malice behind it. They’ve spent so much time being helpless together, having a shared goal feels like an awakening to an older time, brothers bickering over a plan and helping each other every step of the way.

Tommy turns back to his mural.

*Remember these numbers, Ghostbur! They’re very important and Tubbo will be very happy if you tell them to him.*

Even writing Tubbo’s name makes Tommy’s chest ache with desperate longing. He’s almost too scared to consider the idea he might see his best friend again. The very thought feels like something that will bring down punishment.

“How the fuck do you do this? All I ever got easily was a fucking deck of cards, how are you supposed to—” Wilbur trails off irritably.

“You’ve got to *want* it, man. And feel like you *deserve* to want it, eh? So don’t dream too big, start small, okay?” Tommy calls over his shoulder, still at work.

Wilbur is about to resume his efforts, but he takes a moment to stare at the walls and Tommy’s work. Wilbur bites his lip, holding back a grin, eyebrows raised teasingly. “...Is that you and Ghostbur?”

“Fuck off.”

Wilbur holds back a laugh and instead thinks very hard on the declaration of independence. He has to want it. He has to *deserve* it.

Maybe he should try to get something else.

Wilbur pauses again, continuing to complain, hoping if he doesn't overthink it maybe this will come more easily to him. “Why'd you act like you know some *trick* to it, when'd you figure this shit out, then?”

Tommy tenses. “Had a lot of time to work on it, didn't I?”

Wilbur winces. “Right... point taken. Understandable. I guess I... I got my cards. And I *can* get things I want, when I want to make something, I can piece things together, but I dunno how to do it if I don't *actually* want it.”

Tommy shrugs. “So make yourself want it, then.”

“Right,” Wilbur scoffs. “Easy...”

A pause, both of them lost in their own unusual attempts at salvation. Tommy struggles to remember what Ghostbur's little sewer house looked like. There was a fire, and a warm armchair, and a bookshelf in the corner. He doesn't know if they can manifest all that, but he could draw something familiar, the *camarvan* or something—

“Tommy,” Wilbur knows they're both thinking it, even if Tommy is trying not to, but he needs to be sure they have a plan. They're on the clock. Wilbur is surprised Tommy hasn't been taken from him yet, it's been twenty minutes or so by now.

Tommy feels dread overshadow his determination, he pauses. He can already feel what Wilbur is going to say. “...Eh?”

“You *have* to make sure Dream brings me back.”

Tommy waves him off, anxiety stirring in his chest. “I know, of course I know—”

“*Tommy,*” Wilbur silences him with a soft and careful tone, he gets to his feet, putting a gentle hand on Tommy's shoulder again. “No matter what the cost is. He won't bring me back if you ask nicely for a social call, we need a *reason*.”

Tommy's deep rooted dread he'd tried to bury resurfaces. “W-What kind of *reason*—”

“You're gonna have to lie to him, Tommy,” Wilbur says it like he's asking Tommy to climb a mountain, and maybe in a way he is. “You've done it before and I know you can do it again.”

Tommy falters, stepping back. He feels sick. “Right...”

“Tell him I know something about revival. Something he *needs*,” Wilbur is insistent and calm. Tommy is no less panicked.

“If I do that h-he’s gonna hurt you, Wil, you don’t *know* anything—”

“I know,” Wilbur cuts him off gently. “That’s okay. It’s temporary. Just until they get here to save us, right?”

“If I can’t, Wil, if he doesn’t listen— I d-don’t have any *control*, man, if I don’t do what he s-says—” Tommy bites his lip to stop it from trembling. “This alone... *fuck* I’m in for it *bad* this time, when I get back, h-he’s gonna—”

Wilbur hates everything about this. He wishes he could tell Tommy he just has to keep his head down, that he’s the big brother so he’ll find a way to solve it. He wasn’t even good enough to do that for Tommy while he was still alive, let alone now. Wilbur takes a deep breath.

“Tommy, I know you’re scared. It’s okay to be scared, you’ve worked through being scared before, right?” Wilbur can only offer words. They’re as worthless as they were in the first war.

“It’s not just *scared*, Wil, I dunno if I can lie to him. J-Just *running* was— everything in me was telling me I was making a mistake,” Tommy hates this cruel truth that had been nagging at him for so long now. He doesn’t know if he can disobey Dream. Maybe on a fluke, maybe if he’s desperate enough, *running away* always seems easier than trying to confront Dream, and this... this will definitely end in confrontation.

“You got here, Tommy. You managed that. A-And I know you think Dream has beaten you, that you don’t have anything left, any way to fight, but you’re stronger than him. You always have been, and now surviving is a matter of *time*, alright? Enough for help to get here or for Ghostbur to give them coordinates, right?” Wilbur gives Tommy’s shoulder a gentle squeeze, a terrible, uncontrolled mixture of guilt and pride as Wilbur expects his brother to do the impossible.

Tommy is stuck. Wilbur is right, and Tommy knows he needs to be ready, to lie and throw his brother into harm’s way. He cannot argue his way out of this one. It hurts all the same.

But he won’t fail at this. Not because of Dream. Tommy doesn’t want Wilbur to get hurt, that he can struggle with, that he can regret, but he doesn’t want to be scared anymore. He doesn’t want Dream to take away any more of him. That thought *terrifies* him, feeling like something between a failure and a betrayal, but maybe the fact that he doesn’t give up means something. Tommy takes a shaky breath before nodding. “A-And you gotta keep working on this place. Try to make it soft n’ shit.”

Wilbur can’t hold back a smile, as fond as he is worried. He doesn’t want to be the kind of person who would ask his little brother to do something so hard, not anymore. Maybe if he gets to live after this he can finally be the person Tommy once saw him as. “Hey, it’s okay, Tommy, you’re still here,” Wilbur tries to calm him, fervent enthusiasm persisting. “And— And if this works— A-And it’s going to work! It’s going to work— then I’ll be with you soon!

Or at least it'll get Dream away from you for a bit." Wilbur grows more and more adamant, holding onto Tommy's shoulders. "And help is coming, Tommy. They're going to get us out."

Tommy can feel his hands shaking, his heart beating louder in his chest. Believing him feels like something forbidden. "And what if we're dead, Wil? What if we're dead when they do?" Maybe Tommy could convince himself he's strong enough to lie to Dream, to react to him in any way other than doing whatever it takes to avoid the next blow, but that doesn't change anything else. So it still scares him. Mostly because Wilbur is making him think they have a chance.

Wilbur remains utterly determined, something manic in his eyes. He holds onto Tommy tighter, not enough to hurt, but it makes Tommy realize just how badly Wilbur wants this as well.

Wilbur doesn't stop, he can't help but offer this rambling wave of panic and reassurance. "Then they won't stop until he brings us back! And if Dream still has us dead when they arrive, he'd bring one of us back as a hostage, right? Or— Or *something*, right?"

"I guess," Tommy remains frozen. He's grown too accustomed to being helpless, no matter how much he wants to remember how to be himself again, that doesn't make it any easier to do. If Limbo has taught him anything, *wanting* it bad enough has to count for something. "That doesn't sound like it would work out for us, Wil."

"It's not working out now, is it?" Wilbur lets out a high, hysterical laugh, stepping back and spinning unsteadily on his heels. "What else are we—" There's a clatter behind him. Wilbur turns to see the marker roll across the floor from the space his little brother had once occupied.

He's alone.

Wilbur's wreckless hope is replaced in an instant as he stares at the blue marker at his feet. He picks it up. He doesn't know if he could even get something as simple as this, not if he doesn't really want it.

Not if he doesn't think he *deserves* it.

Because that's the real problem, isn't it?

It's not a matter of not wanting enough, nor one of not thinking he *deserves* a book or a marker or any other petty material consolation for him to cling to in this place. He's been able to get things before. Easily, even.

Wilbur doesn't think he deserves to get out.

"It's not about you, you miserable bastard... Come on— Maybe you don't deserve it but..." Wilbur holds onto the marker tighter, staring at the writing on the wall.

*You are safe. You'll be home with your friends soon.*



“Tommy deserves more than this.”

Tommy is gone, and until he sees him again, Wilbur will make Ghostbur’s paradise with vicious willpower. He can see them in the living world, that ghost alongside Tubbo and Ranboo and others, blurry and distorted and slowed in a way that feels impossible to focus on, but they’re there. So he can do this. He resents that ghost almost as much as he resents himself, but his feelings have to be genuine if this is going to work. If he can only manifest things he truly wants, he’ll craft Ghostbur’s desires into his own. Even if it means he has to love a part of himself that got to live when he didn’t get the same chance. Whatever it takes.

~

*“Wake up.”*

Tommy has had worse resurrections. It’s strange, growing a new body from the bones up somehow hurts less than repairing flesh rotted and eaten away. Maybe it’s because it had to regrow an entirely new nervous system, so by the time he could actually *feel* again, the pain was almost over.

Well, at least the pain from resurrection.

“Welcome back, Tommy!” Dream is attempting his usual level of morbid cheerfulness that he carries on Tommy’s return, but whatever illusion of compassion he might bear on a good day is shattered. Every word comes with ill contained fury, he’s almost *jittery*. “Do I even *want* to know what you were attempting to do just now?” It is not a request.

Tommy remains flat on his back, taking deep breaths, trying to adjust to being alive in this moment of respite. He doesn’t feel tense or sore from rigor mortis, just a bit weak. He has the fleeting thought that lava is surprisingly pleasant death and subsequent resurrection. A concerning thought to deal with later, he has bigger problems now. He’s almost surprised that Dream hasn’t already started trying to hurt him.

*“Well?”* Dream steps on Tommy’s hand until something cracks, Dream only stops when Tommy finally reacts, a sharp cry at the familiar feeling of a bone breaking. “You should probably start talking.”

He’s already in pain, but that cannot distract him. He cannot afford to be weak right now.

*You’re gonna have to be smart and sure when you haven’t even been able to think for yourself. You’re gonna have to lie. It’s gonna hurt either way so you might as well be brave.*

Dream grows impatient in an instant, any illusion of restraint falls apart, his boot connects with Tommy’s face, cutting into his cheek so Tommy’s mouth begins to fill with blood in an instant, his jaw stinging sharply. It is not helping him focus on what he has to do. Dream grabs onto the collar of Tommy’s shirt and dragging him from the ground. “You’re going to tell me, Tommy. And you’re going to beg for mercy. Because whatever it is you’re trying to do, it *won’t work*. I don’t *lose*,” he hisses. He’s so close Tommy can just make out piercing furious eyes through the holes in his mask. “You are *nothing* without me.”

It's weak. That's Tommy's first thought through the inherent fear that comes with Dream being this close. Tommy has blood dripping down his chin as he tries not to swallow it, Dream is a second away from grabbing onto his throat and throttling him, he's still full of fury and authority, but he's— Tommy realizes, panic fading and replaced almost by some demented version of relief, Dream is *worried*. Maybe even scared.

Dream is still holding onto him, definitely close enough to hit him again, he's waiting for answers with a well measured threat to hurt Tommy if he doesn't start talking. Tommy giggles.

Dream almost drops him, letting go for a moment before steadying his hold. "...What?"

Dream's confusion makes it easier to fall into hysterics. Tommy can't stop another wheezing laugh rising up around the blood in his mouth.

"Is this *funny* to you?" Dream snarls.

Tommy is calm in an instant, his hand still shakes, it's the one missing an index finger, it's weak and bony, but he still pats Dream's hand on his shirt in some clumsy approximation of pity, like he's not the one at the mercy of the other. Tommy stares at those cold eyes. Dream is this close to scare him, but instead Tommy gets to see through the mask. He's human under there after all.

"You're scared of losing me, aren't you, Dream?"

A moment of stark silence, Tommy staring through that mask, not brave, but fear having become warped into something more like peace. He waits, for Dream to hit him, to keep talking, whatever the consequences, Tommy knows whatever is coming is out of his control too. Tommy has gotten *used* to being out of control. Dream hasn't. And in that way alone, Tommy has the upper hand.

Dream drops him, pacing the room irately. He doesn't reply to Tommy's questioning, instead a retort more like a dog baring its teeth so you don't notice it's already cornered, "I'm gonna sew your fucking lips shut!"

Tommy considers this for a moment, laying on the harsh stone, far too at ease, and shrugs.

"Nah, then you won't know what I'm on about, eh? I *know* things, Dream!" Tommy struggles to sit up. His head pounds and every word spoken hurts, but he persists. "Kill me again. I *fucking* dare you. 'Cause I'm not coming back next time, you fuckin' hear me?"

Dream stops his pacing, hands balled into fists as he turns back to face him. "...*what?*"

"You're on the clock, Dream. One door closes, another one opens, *pal*. Next time I die, I'm gone, got it? Outta here, never coming back, donezo! I am out of here *forever*. Me and Wilbur— and I guess Schlatt and MD of course— are *moving on*." Tommy is utterly helpless, still at the mercy of a man who has broken him so many times before, but for now he'll hold onto this high of having Dream frustrated and falling for his ruse.

Dream processes this slowly, unmoving. Tommy can't fathom what he's thinking. Eventually Dream nods. He takes a moment to search his inventory, returning with a knife. "Fine... you know what, *fine*, I'm taking another finger off if you don't tell me what the hell you're talking about *right now*."

Tommy's laugh comes with a bit more panic now. This is the hard part. "E-Even if I wanted to, *I* dunno how it works, Wil just told me. *He's* the one who was going on about it. Actually, I was sort of hoping when I died just then I wouldn't have to come back, but it's only a matter of time!"

Dream takes a deep breath, twirling the knife through his fingers. It's a tiny shift in posture, a relaxing of the shoulders, the tilt of his head, and Tommy's dread returns to the pit of his stomach like a stone. Dream is back in control. "Oh, *Tommy*. You never learn, do you? You're still the same selfish little brat I keep trying to fix."

Tommy can't help but push himself back until he's pressed into the wall. He's done his part. He has no front left to put up, the adrenaline rush has died and the illusion of power with it. He's not just scared for his own sake.

"Don't look so *nervous*, Tommy. You're gonna get to see your brother again!" Dream grabs Tommy by the hair, slamming his skull into the stone wall before Tommy can reply.

~

Ghostbur is the first one to respond to Tubbo's message.

"Hi, Tubbo! Are we going somewhere?" He drifts around the docks aimlessly.

"Yes, Ghostbur," Tubbo says it offhandedly, fixated on the top of the hillside, waiting. He wants to go *now*, but he knows they need the numbers. Every minute spent waiting feels dangerous.

The first to crest the horizon are Puffy and Sam, followed by Eret, Niki, Jack, Ponk, HBomb, Bad, and Ant.

Tubbo is struck by a relief he hadn't known possible. Maybe he's been alone for too long. He hadn't acknowledged it, but he'd been scared no one would come to help in time.

They could leave now. They have enough fighters.

It takes conscious willpower, but Tubbo waits.

Sapnap and Quackity come next. They've brought Callahan—surprising, but not enough to make Tubbo pause, only feel grateful to have another sword.

Still he waits.

Philza and Technoblade appear from the direction of the portal.

Tubbo almost relaxes. That was what he was waiting for. All their differences, and Tubbo still wanted the Blade at his side to get Tommy back. He wanted someone he knew could kill Dream.

“We’ve got a map. Ranboo remembered where he was,” Tubbo is already heading for the boats.

“What? How’d he know in the first place?” Jack asks, still tightening his armor, looking haggard and overwhelmed. Many of them do, which was fair, considering they’d likely all just been told something terrible and asked to drop everything and get ready to fight. Still, they’re here. That’s what counts.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tubbo glances to the original few who had offered help. “I’m assuming you’ve all filled in the others?”

“Um, yeah—” Puffy looks like she wants to say more.

“We can all debrief once we have Tommy back. If anyone here has doubts, or wants to wait around for evidence, you don’t have to come,” Tubbo is still eerily cold. He had never been a general in the war. He had been a good spy, a good president, and now he would do this. Whatever role it takes for him to get to Tommy, he will fulfill it. Ranboo is the first to follow him towards the boats.

“Why aren’t we going through the Nether?” Techno asks.

“We don’t have coordinates,” Ranboo tells him. “I...” Ranboo feels a swell of nerves. If he’s gotten this wrong, if he’s failed and they lose Tommy because of *him*— “I could only draw a map of the path through the overworld.” He doesn’t have time for this kind of spiral. He can doubt himself later.

Techno clearly wants to push for more, but he knows when to hold back. “Well, let’s get goin’ then.”

Tubbo looks back at the mass of boats behind him, everyone pairing off and ready to move on his orders. He wishes their numbers could give him some peace of mind, his only thought is that there’s little chance they’ll be able to sneak up on Dream now.

~

*“Wake up.”*

Tommy’s head pounds, the room blurs and spins, it’s hard to focus. When his vision clears and he can ignore the taste of iron in his mouth alongside the taste of a health potion— which explained why he’s conscious again— the scene he wakes to offers no comfort.

“Actually, *both* of you wake up,” Dream exhales a laugh. “This was a long time coming, huh? *Both* of you! Together and... *alive*. What else could you two ask for, right?”

Wilbur locks eyes with Tommy, gaze intent and determined. Their job now is to just buy time, for Ghostbur or rescue to take the right steps. That is a petty consolation when so much

bad can happen in that time. Wilbur is on his knees, a chain around his wrist keeping him from standing. Tommy is unbound, which is far more terrifying, he's leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairs. They're in the main hall, the portal a few yards behind Wilbur.

"Hello? You with me, Tommy?" Dream waves a hand in front of his face. "Aw, this doesn't seem like the happy reunion between brothers I was expecting. I thought you'd at least *talk* to him, not just stare stupidly off into space."

"...What?" Tommy blinks, looking back to Dream blearily. His head aches, pain radiating from the back of his skull.

"Wilbur has been much better company lately," Dream saunters over to Wilbur, who glares at Dream with utter loathing. "See, I was just explaining to him your little *episode* you had earlier, the... interesting things you told me." Dream pats Wilbur's head, Wilbur pulling away sharply, but there's nowhere for him to go.

"Don't touch him!" Tommy snarls before he can stop himself. He struggles to stand on unsteady legs, the room spinning, his hand reaches out to catch himself against the wall before he collapses.

"Tommy!" Wilbur almost tries to stand, but even if he could, it's not like he can do anything, but he hates that he's too powerless to even be by his brother's side.

Tommy closes his eyes for a moment until the room stops spinning, before refocusing on Dream, unfazed by his efforts. The thought of trying to defend Wilbur is worse than a joke.

Dream laughs, stepping away from Wilbur and back towards Tommy, looking at him with something almost like curiosity. "Oh *there* you are," he's teasing him, but he sounds intrigued now, arrogant and fascinated by Tommy like even this is part of some experiment. Tommy can't tell if Dream actually feels back in control or maybe he's gone so far off the deep end that he's circled around to seem calm again. Dream knocks his feet out from under him, forcing him back to the ground easily, Tommy gasps as the wind is knocked out of him from the impact. He has a lot more to be scared of than a few bruises. "There's the Tommy I saw earlier! Good to know that annoying little brat is still in there somewhere. Don't worry," Dream leans down so they're eye to eye, that mask so close it sends cold terror down Tommy's spine. He wants to be braver than this. "Eventually I'll kill that part of you. We have all the time in the world, remember?"

Tommy glances to Wilbur at that, almost pleading. He knows Wilbur can't see Ghostbur now, but he wants his brother to tell him it's going to be okay. Wilbur has nothing to give.

~

"Look, Phil! Tropical fish!" Ghostbur leans over the edge of the boat, looking down into the water. "No salmon, though..."

"That's nice, Ghostbur," Phil replies without looking.

He's looking at Tubbo, who remains ahead of their party, following the directions Ranboo sends ahead from his map. Tubbo is alone, Ranboo taking a boat with Technoblade. Techno and Ranboo are both watching Tubbo closely, and Phil is sure if he looked back the rest of their party would be doing the same. The group has remained quiet for the most part, even in such a large group, it's a solemn procession. Phil wonders if Techno sees the familiarity. He must recognize the way they've fallen in line, they both know war too well not to. They're in a flying wedge formation. Phil may never see it as a flight pattern again, but the dynamic is the same. Phil and Ghostbur's boat to the angled right of Tubbo, who remains alone at the lead. Techno and Ranboo to his left, and angled out behind them Sam and Ponk just as in parallel Sapnap and Quackity are behind Phil's boat. From there it's Eret and Puffy in row with Jack and Niki, HBomb and Callahan as well as Bad and Ant taking up the back line.

It feels strange to feel ready for war with one man.

Phil looks back to Tubbo. He has a reason to check in with him beyond general concern. A thought has been circling since he and Techno arrived at the docks and he has a feeling Techno feels the same. Phil and Techno's eyes meet, a mutual understanding. Phil rows a bit faster to catch up so he's almost directly beside Tubbo.

"Hey, Tubbo, you can follow Ranboo's directions and talk a bit too, right?" He begins carefully.

"I guess so, why? Do you want to plan ahead?" Tubbo glances at him before returning to the horizon, waiting for a jagged mountain to appear.

"Uhhh," Phil glances to Techno for support, he just shrugs. "Something like that."

"Phil, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I have certain priorities right now, so why don't you just get to the point?" Tubbo's voice grows high and sharp, staring resolutely ahead.

Phil huffs, he just has to say it, stop trying to look for an easy way out. "You know, if we—*when* we save Tommy, he might..." Phil sighs, weighted and weary. Ghostbur's presence behind him feels louder somehow. "He's not gonna be the Tommy you remember. You know that, don't you?" Phil wishes there was a gentler way to put it, but there really isn't.

Phil can see Tubbo's jaw tense.

"I know," he says tersely.

"Good," Phil says before pushing on. He won't let Tubbo dismiss this. "It's been... It's been months. A lot can change in that time."

"I'm well aware."

Phil looks helplessly back towards Techno. The two of them can manage any fight no problem, but *this*? Unprecedented.

"Uh, maybe you don't wanna hear this from me, but what I think Phil's tryna say, is that you've got to be prepared to bring back a Tommy that..." Techno looks to Phil, who nods

some encouragement. "...isn't really Tommy." Phil quickly shakes his head.

"No, um, *no*, not *quite* like that," Phil gives Techno a look. "More like..." Phil looks forward. His heart aches for the cold, bitter version of the boy he had grown to care for now in front of him. He had never known a Tubbo who wasn't weary in one way or another, but Tubbo had turned so *cold* when Tommy left, and it's only grown worse with time. "...you're gonna need to be ready to see parts of him you don't recognize."

Tubbo is quiet for a moment, still watching the horizon. He feels a lump in his throat that he's quick to bury. He coughs, so his words come out steady. "I know he'll have changed, okay? He changed in Pogtopia, and I know he's gonna have changed now, but he's *still* my best friend." Unspoken, *so I'll love him anyway*.

Phil nods, it's clear Tubbo won't hear any more on the matter. Tubbo has been through enough. Phil doesn't need to keep reminding him of how much worse it could get.

Ranboo distracts them from the current conversation regardless. "...Uh, where's Ghostbur?"

~

They're supposed to be buying time. They hadn't factored in how impossible it would be let each other get hurt.

"Stay away from him! I'm the one that knows shit— *stop!*" Wilbur tugs furiously at the chain around his wrist. "Stop!"

"Then *tell* me something," Dream sighs, having the audacity to sound bored.

"O-Okay! Okay—" Wilbur scrambles to think of some lie, anything to get Dream to take a step towards *him* and not Tommy. "W-What is it you want to know?" Wilbur knows it's a weak attempt.

Dream sighs, a pause like he's expecting more from Wilbur. "You know why he's *here* for this, right?" He points back to Tommy, patronizing and annoyed. Wilbur glances from Dream to Tommy, who has remained pressed against the wall, like he can sink into it and get Dream away from him. Wilbur will get him away instead. "*Wilbur*," Dream snaps his fingers in front of Wilbur's face. "I asked you a question."

"I assumed it was rhetorical," Wilbur says dryly.

Dream sighs, shaking his head, scolding and unforgiving. "Even now, you still don't know when to keep your mouth shut." A pause, inviting Wilbur to offer a retort. Wilbur just stares, bitter and loathing. "You see, Wilbur. Tommy is *here*— not because he *knows* anything, I mean, he's an idiot— but because you're *weak*, Wilbur. You're too *attached*."

Dream looks back to Tommy, head tilted in that way of his, like he's deciding how to butcher him. "Maybe I'll finally cut you two away from each other." Dream has his knife again. It's more a dagger, clean and shining, and waiting for blood to coat its blade.

Tommy doesn't try to run. His nails drag against the blackstone beneath him, he feels his heart pounding in his throat, he feels too frozen to scream. He's had a hard time speaking through all of this, any familiar outbursts of rage or defensiveness that might've come to him a year ago are gone, and maybe that's a mercy, Wilbur could do the talking for the both of them. Tommy couldn't bring himself to fight back on a good day, but with Wilbur beside him on the chopping block, all he can do is take it.

"Wait! *Wait*— Dream, please! *Please* just let me talk! I'll talk— Stop! Dream, *please*, please, just come over here, I-I'll tell you what's gonna happen— Just don't hurt him!" Wilbur pulls against the chain as hard as he can, his boots slipping on the floor and his arm aching from the pull. If he were stronger he would've broken his thumb to get free, but all he can do is reach one desperate hand forward like somehow he can pull Dream away from Tommy.

Dream crouches down so he and Tommy are eye to eye. "Give me your hand, Tommy."

Tommy tries to read something from behind that mask, weighing his options like he's ever had a choice in any of this. The conclusion he reaches is exhausted and cruel but no less true. It's going to happen either way. Tommy holds out his left hand, trembling, palm up, and nails bloody. Tommy knows Dream is smirking behind that mask, that he feels like he's won or proven something over Tommy. It's always been for the same reason. Dream leaving his journal in a chest, Dream leaving a knife in reach of him, Dream leaving him untied while Wilbur remains bound, and now this simple request. Dream just wants to see how tight his hold on Tommy really is. This time Tommy doesn't fail Dream's test and if he weren't so worn down maybe Tommy would hate himself a little more for that.

"Stop— *stop*! Please don't! I said I'd talk— Dream, *please*!" Wilbur is screaming now, still pulling against the chain with what little strength he has, even as the chain digs in enough to break skin. He cannot let Dream hurt his brother right in front of him, he's supposed to *save* Tommy. All that time dead, chained to the role of witness, only able to watch Tommy's pain through Ghostbur's eyes, through Tommy's horror stories and haunted eyes on his return, and yet again Wilbur cannot help him. "*Tommy, please!*"

Something makes Dream pause. The knife doesn't come down, it stays poised above the soft, breakable skin under Tommy's thumb. Dream lets go of Tommy's hand and turns to face Wilbur once more. "Huh," Dream, in all his cruelty, sounds amused.

Wilbur is breathing harder now, his wrist aching in protest. Wilbur can feel blood beading around the torn skin, but he just keeps staring at Dream. Not without hatred, but a hatred utterly drowned out in desperation. He says nothing.

Dream steps closer, leaning down to Wilbur's eye level. "You wanna know something?"

Wilbur almost leans away, staring back, just waiting for the other shoe to drop. "...What?" Wilbur forces one word out, anything to be sure Dream's attention stays on him. He doesn't look at Tommy, only at that stupid mask.

"You sound like Ghostbur."

Whatever Wilbur had expected from Dream, that wasn't it. "*What?*"



Dream exhales a laugh. “You sound like *Ghostbur*. Not all the time, obviously. But when you’re begging for Tommy’s life or sanity or whatever. You sound like him.” Dream reaches forward, maybe to force Wilbur to look him in the eye again, or to hold him still so he can turn the knife on Wilbur instead. He never gets the chance. “It’s interesting, you know? You’re weak like him–”

Wilbur has been waiting for this.

The second Dream is within reach, Wilbur has the chain around his neck, dragging him to the ground with him, trying to keep a man much stronger and much more well protected pinned down. Dream is already struggling furiously, the surprise having worn off far too quickly. Wilbur just holds onto the chain tighter, desperation making him stronger as he pulls like he can garrote Dream’s head from his shoulders, trying to keep behind him so Dream can’t use his knife, not to say he isn’t trying. Wilbur flinches as the blade catches his cheek, cutting deep, as Dream fights to stab him over his shoulder, but Wilbur still holds on.

Tommy bolted to his feet the moment Wilbur and Dream had both hit the ground, but he can’t move. He stares in petrified dread at Wilbur struggling with his tormentor on the ground. *He’s gonna lose. Fucking do something you coward, he’s gonna lose–*

“Tommy, run!” Wilbur shouts at him, even as Dream elbows him in the chest, as the dagger slices through the back of his hand. Wilbur’s grip on the chain weakens, it digs in and hurts and tears at the skin of his hands, blood making it slick and hard to hold onto, but he doesn’t let go, using his body weight to try and keep Dream on the ground with him. He won’t be able to hold him for much longer, Dream is pulling the chain away from his throat, but Wilbur fights to hold on, “*Tommy, run!*”

The spell breaks. Tommy runs for the portal.

*You’re not gonna make it. Just like last time, he’s gonna grab you and drag you out and he’s gonna hurt you even worse–*

The world begins to bend around him. Tommy manages a split second of relief before he remembers who he’s leaving behind.

~

“Hi, Phil!”

“Fucking christ–” Phil almost jumps out of the boat. “Ghostbur! Where the hell have you been?!”

Ghostbur sits in the back of the boat like he hadn’t gone anywhere, perfectly content. “I don’t know, I think it was actually quite interesting! There were pretty drawings on the wall–”

“Is that it?” Ponk interrupts. Everyone looks ahead.

A towering, shattered mountain cuts through the sky. A beacon and a warning.

“Yeah,” Ranboo stares up at it, a mixture of adrenaline and anxiety echoing like lightning under his veins. “That’s it.”

~

Tommy is disoriented enough by the swirling portal, but when he finally staggers into the Nether, he’s surprised he doesn’t pass out. Hot, dry wind hits him like a wall, the netherrack beneath him is hot and crumbled and jagged under his feet, it’s dark, but the lava is so bright it’s blinding all at once. He doesn’t have time to adjust, even if this is as close to being outside as he’s gotten in... he doesn’t know how long.

Tommy is frozen for a moment, he has maybe ten seconds, if Wilbur can hold him. He has to choose— run or hide?

This is its own peculiar horror, to know he alone is responsible for his own fate— Either one can end in pain. He’s weak, there’s too much ground to cover, he has no idea where he is or where he could even try to run. If he hides... *help is coming*. He’s gotten good at waiting. Tommy sees where the netherrack slopes away and divots into little caves and takes off running, painfully reminded of the limp in his left leg as he struggles down a jagged slope, uneven enough to cut into his bare feet. He cannot hesitate, Tommy slides down between the rocks, forcing his skinny, bruised body between them, shoving himself back as far as he can manage even when it digs in and hurts. The rock is warm. The heat feels like it’s pressing in on him, suffocating him, not enough to burn, but still too much after so much time of cold and nothing.

The portal hums. “*TOMMY!*”

Tommy covers his mouth. He’s breathing too hard, too *loud*. All he can think about is what happened to Wilbur. The walls are closing in around him, the air is too hot, he can’t breathe it in, but he can’t hear Dream anymore, why doesn’t that make him feel better, why can’t he just fucking *breathe*? Tommy lets out a whimper against his own volition, covering his mouth with both hands, not caring as it stifles his breathing further, his every thought is occupied in his own silence, he *cannot* make a sound.

That’s why he doesn’t scream when Dream drags him out of there, throwing him on the ground.

“Really, Tommy, you try and *hide* from me?” Dream jeers. “You should know *better* by now, all that time I spent trying to teach you, trying to make you actually *worth* something, and you’re still a pathetic, stupid brat just *asking* to get hit.”

Tommy scrambles back until he hits a wall of rock, still gasping for breath as Dream towers over him. He wants Wilbur to be here. He knows it wouldn’t make any difference, but he wants him there all the same.

“I don’t know what else it’ll take for you to get it through your head,” Dream pursues, grabbing Tommy by the arm, pulling him to his feet. “Keep on trying to hide, to run from me, to make your little *plans*,” Dream pulls him closer, that terrible mask filling Tommy’s line of sight. Every word Dream says is coated in malice. “I will *always* find you.”

~

They wait in the boats for a minute, Phil having offered to scout ahead. He sees nothing, just dry brush and scraggly trees surviving the ocean winds. He motions the rest to follow him. It's a slow, careful procession, scaling the cliff.

"You're... you're *sure* it's up there? There's not like, a cave nearby?" Bad asks Ranboo breathlessly, looking down at the water far below before back to Ranboo, who climbs just ahead.

"Yep," Ranboo doesn't care if he sounds sharp. They're so close now.

"Okay... got it," Bad sighs.

Ant climbs past him easily, agile and, well, catlike in his ability. "Come on, Bad, don't tell me you're getting weak in your old age!" He teases him.

Tubbo remains at the lead, Phil giving him a hand over the cliffside. He walks forward, looking around, searching for any sign of Tommy.

Ghosbur reached the top sooner than the others, no mortal body to slow him down. "Oooh, this is a pretty view! Look, the sun is setting!"

Tubbo turns as the sun touches the horizon. It's lonely up here. There's nothing but dry grass and wind and the sky empty and consuming all at once. He wonders if Tommy ever saw this. If he'd taken any peace in it.

"Someone has been here," Phil points to the ground beneath a tree. There's a shattered glass bottle among the dry grasses.

Tubbo turns away from the sun. He feels a jolt in his stomach, something between panic and hope. This is no longer a fluke or a chance, there's something tangible.

"Hey, that actually reminds me," Techno having followed just behind Tubbo, stretches, before going to his inventory. "Found this. At Logstedshire," he offers Tubbo the broken compass and the tattered bandana. Staring at the bloodstained, filthy, ashened cloth, Techno has a moment of doubt, wondering if he should've shown Tubbo that, especially now. It's too late to go back on it.

Tubbo stares at them blankly, reaching out like he wants to take them, before stopping himself. "Oh."

"Yeahhh, uh. Sorry," Techno says awkwardly. "Bet you could get him a... new bandana, though, right?"

Tubbo still looks oddly numb, staring at the shattered compass and the bandana like he doesn't know what to make of them. "...right."

"Well! That's a problem for later," Phil interjects, as the rest of their party finishes scaling the cliff.

“Do you want me to..?” Techno hesitates for another moment. “I’ll just... I’ll just keep them, then. For now.” Techno puts them back in his inventory with the utmost care. He doesn’t know why they feel so important, and he doesn’t want to admit the nagging fear that if this goes badly, they might need to have something else to bury.

Tubbo nods. He feels sick.

That was not just a glass bottle in the grass. That bandana was *Tommy’s*. It shouldn’t mean anything, it shouldn’t change how he’s feeling right now, it isn’t any indication that he’s *here*, only a vestige from Logstedshire, but the blood...

Tubbo already knew what was coming. He won’t freeze up over this. Whatever comes next, Tubbo cannot break down. He’s here because Tommy needs him.

“Where to now?” Tubbo turns to Ranboo.

“Umm,” Ranboo stares around the cliff worriedly. “I... I don’t know. The map said... it said in the mountain...”

“Are you sure there’s not anything else, Ranboo?” Niki asks him, not accusing in any way, more gentle concern.

“I... I don’t think so, no...”

“We could fan out? Look for something?” Puffy offers.

“Look for a trap door, or a lever,” Sam adds.

“Do you think we’re supposed to dig into it?” Eret asks.

There are too many voices clamoring, Ranboo just shrugs helplessly. He’s surprised he could even get them this far.

“Hey, guys?” Quackity calls from the top of a slope down into a half covered cave underneath the tallest peak. “How about a fucking hole in the mountain?”

They flock to him immediately. Techno slides down the slope ahead of the group, a pool of water gathered from a crevice in the rocks, light reflecting in it from the room, netherite boots splashing loudly as he heads over to the cave’s entrance. “No one’s here. It’s safe to come down.”

Tubbo feels a jolt of dread at Techno’s words, half running down to join him, the others close behind, the splashing of them marching forward echoes around the cave, and water follows them into the room as they kick through it, but that’s the only sound, no one speaks as they approach.

The room is empty. Tubbo feels a jolt of panic. There has to be more.

It has an x marked out in the floor, a block deep, as well as glowstone lamps lighting it.

“It’s redstone. It’s gotta be,” Sam breaks the silence, assessing it carefully, circling the blackstone. “Everything else about the cave is natural. Does anyone have a lever?” He bends down to look at a divot in the stone, where it looks like something had once been slotted into place. Callahan offers him a lever. “Oh, thanks, Callahan.” Sam looks to the rest of the crowd gathered in a loose circle around the center. “Might want to step back. Or maybe even step outside. This could just as likely blow up in our faces. I mean that literally.”

“If Dream wanted to blow us up, he would’ve left a lever for us,” Sapnap says with maybe too much confidence. Everyone looks at him, he shuffles his feet, fiddling with his sword. “Probably...”

Sam shrugs. “Right, fine. Suit yourselves. Might want to have your shields ready, though.”

Tubbo stays maybe a bit too close, as the others step back. Sam switches the lever. A few people jump at the loud, clunking hum of redstone and pistons. Then the part of the floor in the middle begins to lower.

“It’s an elevator. Huh,” Sam frowns, looking down at it as it begins to sink further into the floor.

“Come on, before it gets too far away,” Tubbo hops down onto the receding platform before anyone can try to stop him. He’s not going to waste time on doing the rational thing, pausing and thinking things through, no more leading with his head, his heart is going to take charge for now, damn the consequences. At least until he gets Tommy back.

“We might not all be able to fit on there,” Techno points out.

Quackity just shrugs, before following Tubbo, Sapnap just behind him. Others hop down before it gets too far, the platform growing more crowded, the narrow tunnel feeling warm and claustrophobic, armored bodies knocking into each other, the last of them being Sam, who winces as even with feather falling it sends a sharp jolt through his ankles.

“You almost hit me, Sam,” Quackity grumbles, rubbing his elbow where Sam had knocked into him.

“Sorry.”

Nerves are running high, Tubbo hates feeling boxed in, but at least every person pressing in around him is here for the same thing. They’re all here to save Tommy.

“Anyone else feel sort of like we’re descending into hell?” Jack says helpfully.

“Really helping the mood there, Jack,” Eret says.

A collection of gasps and exclamations of surprise echo through the massive chamber. They all can’t help but circle closer to the middle of the platform, even as they crowd each other, as there are no walls and it’s a long way down. The hall is huge, and definitely suits an egomaniac. To the left is a corridor, extending back a ways, and to the right, a narrow

staircase goes up to a small doorway into the wall. Tubbo is off the platform before they even reach the ground, half running forward, looking to the left down the corridor, where there are plaques and item frames and even what looks like animal pens, but no people. Tubbo turns towards the narrow staircase as the others spread out around him.

“I’m gonna see if there’s more through the portal,” Sapnap heads towards the Nether.

“What the fuck is this?” Quackity stops in the threshold of the corridor off to the side. “Sapnap, wait, come look at this— this one says Beckerson on it. And Mars.”

“What?” Sapnap stops, jogging over to join him.

Tubbo has not yet gone up the staircase. He’s distracted by a pool of blood and a chain strewn across the floor at the bottom. Tubbo jumps when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

Ranboo doesn’t say anything, but he stays.

“You know, being underground reminds me of something. It’s different, though. The walls were white, or maybe grey, not black,” Ghostbur drifts aimlessly, unperturbed by the somber mood of a rescue party.

Not far behind them, there’s a clamoring of voices as they spread deeper into the corridor.

“There’s a spot for Fran,” Ponk calls to Sam.

“There’s a *what?*” Sam rushes to join them.

“This is *fucked*, man,” Jack stares around, wandering further down the corridor.

Bad is frozen towards the end. “*Skeppy?*” He says softly, horror unquantifiable. They’re here for a rescue mission, but they have to at least pause for this. It’s not what any of them had expected to come of this day.

Technoblade takes over for Sapnap, going to check the Nether portal, while Phil goes towards the staircase.

“Don’t go up there, alone, Phil!” Techno calls warningly.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t fuss, mate,” Phil calls over his shoulder.

“I want to come!” Ghostbur says cheerily, drifting up the stairs.

“Tubbo?” Ranboo asks softly as his friend remains frozen.

Tubbo opens his mouth to speak. *He’s not gonna be here, is he, Ranboo?*

He can’t bring himself to say it. So he just keeps staring at the blood on the floor.

~

Tommy opens his eyes to an arched, tiled ceiling above him. He hadn't been in the void for even a moment. *Maybe you're getting good at this, eh?* Not exactly a happy thought, but he takes some bitter pride in it nonetheless.

Wilbur looks down at him, offering him a hand off the ground. He looks disappointed, almost, but not surprised. Tommy accepts the hand, Wilbur pulling him up and into a hug. Tommy wonders if Wilbur is thinking the same thing; how unfair it is that they can only hug each other when they're dead.

"Thanks for..." Tommy laughs weakly. "Thanks for trying, Wil! Made it fuckin' twenty blocks before I tried to hide in a hole... should've kept running. Fuckin' stupid of me..."

Wilbur sighs, pulling away, thinking in his anger he might hug Tommy too tight. "I don't know what I was even trying to accomplish! I just— I couldn't—" Wilbur struggles to find the words.

"...let him cut my thumb off without a fight?" Tommy offers dully.

"...yeah, that." Wilbur loses his momentary passion.

"You did it!" Tommy notices the room. There are books scattered along the floor, there's a blue wool blanket bundled in the corner, there's even a *guitar*. "I knew you could, man!"

"Yeah... Yeah, guess I did," Wilbur is too miserable right now to take pride in that. He stares at the walls that have entombed him for over a decade. They're different for the first time in all of that, covered in blue ink from what Tommy had made. "Wait, look—" Wilbur steps up towards the wall. "His... his fucking *handwriting* even looks like mine, that's weird as shit..."

"What're you on about?" Tommy steps up beside him.

"Look, Ghostbur wrote a reply."

Underneath Tommy's message:

*Remember these numbers, Ghostbur! They're very important and Tubbo will be very happy if you tell them to him.*

A reply:

*Ok! :D*

"...Is that it?" Tommy frowns.

"*Is that it—* He was *here*, Tommy! He saw the coordinates! That's— That's *something*. That's more than something!" Wilbur regains his passion in an instant. "I wonder— Okay, gimme a minute to focus, this bit is hard, but if I really try I might be able to piece together what Ghostbur's seeing. It's all slowed down and muddled, but—" Wilbur shuts his eyes, pressing the palm of his hands into them until he sees colors. Tommy manages to keep his silence, even as he wants to say anything to fill up the empty space.

“They’re– They’re on a cliff. It’s... It’s surrounded by ocean. Wait– Tommy, didn’t you say–”

“Is it a savanna?” Tommy asks excitedly.

“Yes! So that’s it, they’re here, right?!” Wilbur actually jumps, turning to face Tommy with that old gleam in his eye again.

“That’s– That’s *good*, Wil, but not sure if you’ve noticed,” Tommy gestures broadly to the station. “They can’t exactly *get* to us like this.”

“Yeah, but they sure can get to Dream!” Wilbur laughs. “This is– Tommy, this is the most progress, this is the most I’ve done *at all* in thirteen years. So. I’ll take it!”

Tommy rolls his eyes, but he can’t suppress a grin. “Fine, fine, you stupid optimist. Can you keep looking? I know it’s all slow for us n’ shit but I wanna know what the fuck is going on.”

They both know this is naive and desperate. Loss is going to hurt no matter what, they might as well hope again.

~

Phil enters the narrow corridor carefully, shield in front of him. There are two turns to either side, and a staircase going down a little further on. Phil sees a wall of lava covering one doorway and a lever beside it. He keeps his shield facing the other doorway, looking through an open iron door to a library. He can smell smoke. Whatever papers had been on a desk before are burned and gone.

“Ooh, a library!” Ghostbur stops there, turning off to the side. Phil doesn’t follow. Tommy and Dream weren’t in there. There’s a button beside the wall of lava. Phil steps back a bit.

“Someone want to cover me, here? There’re two ways ahead, I’m not turning my back on one,” Phil calls back. He doesn’t bother with whispering. The elevator was definitely loud enough to announce their arrival.

“I will,” Tubbo leaves Ranboo’s side, falling in stride with Phil, his shield ahead of him, and Dream’s axe in his other hand.

“Here,” Phil elbows the button. “I’m guessing the lava will go down. I’m gonna walk ahead.”

“Right,” Tubbo rolls back his shoulders and holds onto his axe a little tighter. He can’t go in swinging, but if he sees an opportunity he will not be hesitating.

Phil continues straight on. There’s a brief stone staircase, and then it just gets dark. Phil doesn’t stop, but he’s wired like a spring, any movement, he’s bashing them back with his shield. He hasn’t survived this long being reckless.



The lava lowers and Tubbo is in the room without a second thought. He wasn't reckless before all of this.

There's no one here. Tubbo feels another pang of frustrated panic. "Nothing here, Phil!" He calls back out into the corridor.

Then he takes in the scene before him.

Obsidian walls throughout, a single glowstone lamp, a bed, a sink, even a lectern. Tubbo feels the ache in his chest worsen. His first coherent thought is the room is too small. Tommy would've hated how small it is. *Would have.* Tubbo knows Tommy *had* hated it. Tubbo doesn't want to think about how much time Tommy spent locked in these four walls. It's designed for someone to live in it. Somehow it makes Tommy's absence feel more real, just by knowing maybe hours ago Tommy had stood in this very room. Then he sees the flowers.

They're long dead, dried up and with only a few petals holding on, but flowers all the same.

They're poppies.

Well over a week ago, Tubbo had left poppies on Tommy's grave.

*Oh.*

Tubbo thinks he might be sick.

All of those months, all of those flowers going missing, and they'd ended up *here*. A cruel thread had been connecting him to Tommy all this time.

"Oh my god..." Tubbo puts a hand to his mouth, leaning against the wall. He cannot break down right now. He cannot be weak right now. Tubbo takes a deep, shuddering breath. He stands up straighter and wipes his eyes. He stares down at the axe named *Nightmare*.

It's going to go right through Dream's skull.

~

"They're there! They're down there— Holy shit, Tommy a lot of people are there, it looks like Phil is checking out the hallway with the rooms," Wilbur tries to pass things along to Tommy best he can, but it's difficult to understand what he's seeing, let alone try and say it to someone else. He manages to give these little descriptions every few minutes, it's not much but he and Tommy are holding onto them literally for dear life.

"We're in the fucking library now, of course. Useless ghost," Wilbur mutters a bit later.

"And..." Wilbur opens his eyes, staring straight ahead blankly at the blue ink all over the walls.

"Wilbur? Wilbur, what is it, what's wrong?" Tommy circles him anxiously, his desperate hope is a delicate thing, and he's just waiting for Wilbur to tell him it's broken.

Wilbur is quiet for another moment and Tommy can't tell if he's trying to get more from Ghostbur or what. "Wil, what is it?!"

"Nothing— it's..." Wilbur shakes his head, and it's like he comes out of a daze, out of Ghostbur's head and back into his own, he looks at Tommy with more clarity now. "That's the problem, it's literally nothing. The idiot won't leave the library so I can't see what's fucking happening."

~

Tubbo heads back to the hall, looking across to only see books and Ghostbur meeting him at the door.

"Phil?" Tubbo walks past him and heads down the stairs, Ghostbur follows him like this is merely an errand he's coming along for.

"Tubbo, wait!" Phil tries to block the doorway, but by then it's already too late.

The dim torchlight over his shoulder is bright enough to illuminate the blood on the obsidian floor, his and Phil's shadows flickering, like they're flinching away from something on the ground. Ghostbur has no shadow. And surely he cannot comprehend what he's seeing now, Tubbo barely can.

"Tubbo, I know, but he's not here, so. You should go back up," Phil says firmly, a gentle hand on Tubbo's shoulder. Tubbo pushes forward. "Please, mate, you shouldn't see this—"

Tubbo doesn't care, he barrels past him, fumbling for a torch from his inventory.

It looks no better in the light.

If the other cell had seemed small, Tubbo feels like the mountain itself is wrapping around him. It's not merely the blood— while there is far too much of it, spattered across the floor and dripping down the walls— it's the obsidian.

There are desperate, clawing scratches all over the walls. Tubbo turns around slowly, letting every part of this room sink into him like poison in a wound. Above the doorframe is where there are the most scratches. Tubbo doesn't know that it's because the top of the doorframe had been the only bit of air or light Tommy could reach, wide enough for Tommy to scrape his fingers raw trying to dig his way out.

The nail marks look almost white compared to the obsidian, white and red lines, angled around the doorframe like arrows pointing tauntingly to the only way out.

Tubbo pukes onto the already bloody floor.

~

"Really? Is that all?" Tommy scoffs, trying to bury the fact that Wilbur is starting to scare him. "What is it *really*, Wilbur, I feel like we've been through enough shit together that you'd stop lying to me."

“I’m not lying, don’t worry,” Wilbur turns to face him, putting a hand on either shoulder so Tommy looks him head on. “Look, when– when we get out of here, you might see something scary, okay? A-And we don’t *really* know what’s gonna happen now, so I’m just gonna say some shit and you can’t get mad at me for it, alright?”

“The fuck are you on about–”

“Tommy, give me a minute, *please*, ” Wilbur stops him, intent and desperate. “I love you, okay? You’re my brother, and I love you, and I am so proud of you, Tommy. And– And I’m sorry for everything.”

Tommy stares at him in stunned silence for a moment before shaking his head. “...We might not even get out of here, Wil, why are you being like this?”

“Hey, don’t say that, Tommy,” Wilbur steps closer, staring at him with such certainty Tommy can’t help but trust him. “It’s gonna be okay. They’re coming. I promise.”

“Why’re you saying that shit?” Tommy stares at him, like he’s trying to read something behind those warm brown eyes. “Why’re you... Why’re you crying, Wil?”

Wilbur quickly brushes his face, smiling. “I’m just happy, Tommy. I’m happy we get to go home.”

~

“Take a deep breath, mate,” Phil rubs Tubbo’s back, voice soft and soothing. “We should get out of here, alright? Come on, we’re gonna get him, let’s keep moving, right?”

Ghostbur interrupts the scene of horror, tapping Phil on the shoulder. “There’s something in the library, Phil! I can’t remember what it is, but I think it’s for you!”

Phil turns to face him sharply. “Tommy?”

Tubbo stands up straight again, looking to Ghostbur with desperate, vicious drive. Ghostbur scuffs his translucent feet on the stone. “Uh, no, I’m pretty sure it’s not Tommy.”

~

“Let me... Let me see again, see if Ghostbur has left the library,” Wilbur quickly turns away.

“No, Wil, come on–”

“He hasn’t told them the fucking coordinates, Tommy!” Wilbur grows sharp. “Fuck– sorry, it’s just– he still hasn’t told them. I think he might remember somewhere in there, but he hasn’t told anyone.”

That distracts Tommy for the moment. “Fuck– but I *told* him to tell Tubbo, he’s going to tell him, right?”

“I dunno, let me focus, I gotta see–”

~

Tubbo makes it back to the main hall. Technoblade has returned from the nether and Tubbo looks to him, looks for *anything*. Techno just shakes his head.

Tubbo hits the wall beside the staircase, sliding to the floor, not knowing Tommy had been right there mere hours ago. Ranboo is back by his side, staring out at the corridor across from them where the others still try to wrap their heads around Dream's trophies.

"He's not..." Ranboo speaks quietly, like maybe even Tubbo isn't supposed to hear him. "He's not here, is he?"

Both of them are drowning now, guilt and horror and loss like a buzzing in the back of their heads, burying any thought other than:

*How could you lose him how could you lose him how could you lose him—?*

"Come on, Phil! I'm pretty sure it's important, can you just check the library for me—" Ghostbur is still talking.

"Fuck— Fine, Ghostbur, I'll be there in a second—"

"Go on without me! Speaking of important, I just remembered something!" Ghostbur drifts down the stairs, joining Tubbo and Ranboo. "Can I talk to you, Tubbo?"

"Ghostbur, please, it's not a good time right now," Ranboo sighs wearily. He can't bring himself to be cruel to the ghost, but ignorance does not excuse the harm Ghostbur can cause just by being.

"Aw, okay. Well, I'll just write it down for later, then."

~

"Yes!" Wilbur jumps, fists in the air. "Oh, thank fuck— He's— He's writing the coordinates down, they're written down, that's— that's something, right?"

"He's— Why doesn't he just tell Tubbo? Where's Tubbo, Wil?" Tommy still circles him, like he's still just a little kid hoping for attention from his cool older brother.

"Fuck if I know, he's— What the fuck, I mean, if it *works*, I guess—"

"What, what?!" Tommy is about to start shaking him.

Wilbur paces the room irritably. "He put the note in his fucking hand, but he didn't tell him fucking anything, this stupid fucking ghost is driving me insane—"

"But he *has* it, doesn't he?" Tommy follows Wilbur closely.

~

“Alright, for later, then!” Ghostbur whispers loudly. Ghostbur slips a piece of paper into Tubbo’s hand.

Tubbo just keeps staring at the blood on the floor, crushing the paper in his hand.

*You can’t give up on him. You won’t.*

“Hm, I think it *is* important, though, maybe more important than what’s for Phil in the library, I’m sorry I can’t remember Tubbo... That place was nice, where I got the numbers...” Ghostbur continues to ramble, not noticing his unwilling audience.

“Wait,” Ranboo blinks. “Numbers, Ghostbur, what numbers?”

Ghostbur looks past him, smiling brightly towards the top of the staircase. “Oh there you are, Phil! You found it!”

~

“Yes!” Wilbur collapses into the bench along the back wall. “Fucking *finally*– that tall not-enderman fella is asking about it.” Wilbur looks like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. “They’ve got the coordinates.”

“So, okay– Well, we don’t know for sure, but that’s something, that’s– They might be able to follow him, then, right?” Tommy says it like he’s trying to convince himself.

Wilbur gets to his feet, pulling Tommy into a tight hug. Tommy hugs back, burying his face in Wilbur’s shoulder. “Yeah, Tommy. It’s something.”

Hope. Just not for him. Just not for him.

~

Phil returns from the hallway.

He’s carrying a body.

Tubbo hates that his first response is relief.

It’s not Tommy.

## Chapter End Notes

So. Uh. Hi.

This fic has blown up So Much since my last update and I can't really quantify how amazing it's been to see people talking about it, making fanart, sharing it with other people, I am shocked and delighted and so grateful to all of you <3 (speaking of, I'm

thinking about linking fanart in the notes of relevant chapters. Because some of the art I've seen is just amazing.)

If you all ever want to link me to fanart or share thoughts about the fic or anything, you can find me at my tumblr, peninkwrites [here](#)

I also posted a web weaving for crime boys in this fic [here](#)

Another thing of importance– please be sure to put "tddd" in your tweets/tags about this fic. As we all know this fic is often times pure horror and it's important to be sure people who don't want to see that can filter it out!

I wish I had more coherent thoughts for you all, but after finishing this chapter my brain is just empty. Still, thank you thank you thank you!

Also: thank you so much for all the sweet comments!! I'm going to try to at least respond to the ones on the last chapter but know I read and loved them all <3

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

Usual TWs: Threats of violence, actual violence, lots of referenced character death, and temporary character death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur is still hugging Tommy when he's torn away from him.

He falls forward, startled, now holding nothing, now alone.

"W-Wait, I have to— I have to tell you—" Wilbur stammers into the empty air, looking around like somehow Tommy will reappear. "I have to tell you..." Wilbur falls silent, not even because no one is listening, but because he can't think of anything. There's so much more and nothing more to say.

Wilbur should know this part well by now. Yet again he is resigned to his role as witness. He can feel sorry for himself once Tommy is rescued. Rescue is coming. It has to be by now.

But it seems like they're still in the vault, distorted and blurred like always, but something has made them pause on their mission. Wilbur knows what. He cannot even wait in suspense. He knows what will happen now. That doesn't stop his dread.

~

Tommy is still hugging Wilbur when he's torn away from him.

*"Wake up."*

Tommy bolts alive with a scream, gasping for breath through aching and tired lungs. He looks for Dream.

He's not here.

That is far more terrifying.

Dream had to have been there a moment before, Tommy had *heard* him, he *had* to be nearby. Tommy staggers to his feet, taking a moment to assess himself. Nothing broken, he can still see, he can still speak. That's something. This room is empty, stonebrick walls and no discernible exits. It is lit by a single torch. Not *entirely* empty. There are two pools of bubbling water in the floor, a trap door above each of them.

"Tommy."

Tommy screams, pressing himself into the wall, heart racing. Dream stands in a doorway, part of the stone having slid away.

“Hey, calm down. Don’t worry, I’m here,” Dream steps closer and Tommy can hear how smug he is, how there’s nothing more amusing to him than masquerading compassion when he knows they’re both well beyond that game they once played.

Tommy knows he should keep his mouth shut, keep his head down, his one goal to avoid pain until help arrives, if help is coming at all. Still, he can’t stop himself. “Where’s Wilbur?”

“Hm. Maybe you should be more worried about yourself,” Dream takes another step closer. Tommy has nowhere to go. “But he’s fine. Alive. Safe.”

Alive is good. Alive means if— *when* help arrives, they won’t need to struggle with Dream resurrecting him. Tommy is more worried that Dream is actually giving him answers.

“For now.”

That’s more like it.

Tommy knows what’s coming is going to hurt. Dream is too calm. That fury, that deranged god complex, it’s muted. It feels like a viper waiting to strike. Tommy wants to close his eyes, to block out whatever is going to happen to him, he can only watch that white mask, waiting for him to come closer.

Tommy never got the chance to ask Wilbur what was wrong. He was taken away like he always is. No warning, no time for a last goodbye. He doesn’t have time to regret that fact either. He’s here now and alone with Dream. He had been so distracted with desperate hope, he’d almost forgotten to dread what comes next.

*They have the coordinates. It’s not hopeless yet. You and Wil can still get out of here.*

Tommy keeps scanning the room. There aren’t any other doorways, as far as he can see anyway. He doesn’t know where Dream has put Wilbur. He’d just seen him in limbo, surely. Unless there’s some time lost between limbo and resurrection. He doesn’t know why Wilbur kept talking like that, maybe he doesn’t *want* to know why, but maybe he also had a point. Tommy had known Dream would take him from Wilbur eventually, rescue coming or not, so at least Wilbur had left things off on a good note.

*“You’re my brother, and I love you, and I am so proud of you, Tommy.”*

Fuck. He never said it back. *Again.*

He’s going to have another chance. He’ll say it back next time. He will. He has to.

“This has been an... *exciting* day, hasn’t it?” Dream finally speaks, mocking and bitter.

Tommy looks back to him. He knows he’s shaking, his breathing trembling and unsteady, but even the fear feels disconnected from himself. He’s just so tired of being afraid.



“Don’t look so worried, Tommy,” Dream chastizes him, patronizing and cold. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Terrifying.

“Wilbur, on the other hand...”

Tommy breaks his silence immediately. “Don’t– Please, don’t, I’ll– I’ll–” Tommy has no bargaining chips. What, he’ll offer to *behave*? To be a good little lab rat? Dream is never going to believe that again.

“Aw, Tommy, this isn’t for *you*. I’m not hurting him *for you*. You’re still so self absorbed, you know that? I’m going to hurt him because this is his *fault*, isn’t it? He’s the one who gave you all these... crazy ideas of *running* or trying to trick me or to get help,” Dream laughs. “Hasn’t really worked out for you two, has it?” He feigns pity.

“No, you’ve– You’ve got it wrong–” Tommy stammers. “I ran to *him*, it wasn’t– please–”

Dream leans forward, Tommy flinches at just that, rambling cut off sharply. He swallows thickly, mouth very dry. He keeps checking Dream’s hands for a weapon. Not that he needs a sword to bash Tommy’s face in. “I’m never *wrong*, Tommy. And I never said I was gonna hurt him *bad*, or even break him beyond repair, you know? Just... consequences for his actions. I’ve already hurt him. You just decide how bad,” Dream isn’t angry right now because he’s having fun. He’s holding Wilbur over Tommy just to taunt him. “But don’t worry about him right now. You and me have some things to figure out.”

Tommy doesn’t try to run, he doesn’t say a word, he just stares at Dream’s empty mask and waits, cold dread like a weight on his chest. He thinks of the steps Dream had taken before to stop him from running. Last time he’d ran, he’d lost the privilege of being outside, of being out of a cell, of having any illusion of freedom. Talking to the Enderman led to violent, brutal incentive for Tommy to keep his mouth shut. Tommy doesn’t want to think about how far Dream will go now. He doesn’t want to be broken forever.

“Don’t look so *panicked*. Like I said, Wilbur has to take responsibility for what *he* did. You... I mean there will be consequences, obviously, but mostly I just want to rebuild. To get back to where we were before!” Dream almost sounds fond, he reaches forward, maybe just to ruffle Tommy’s hair like he does when he’s playing the role of friend, but Tommy scrambles to the side, backing himself into a corner, anything to keep some distance between them. Dream doesn’t acknowledge it. “You know,” Dream laughs. “Your old friends got close to taking you. I mean like, I left through the portal right when I heard the elevator start going. I *heard* the portal as someone tried to follow us through, but by then it was too late, you know? Not like I left a path for them to follow. And I burned all the maps and things obviously.” Dream thinks this is all new information to Tommy. Tommy is meant to look hopeless and terrified, hope or not, it’s easy for him to look as heartbroken as Dream thinks he should. If he’d gotten rescued then, he wouldn’t have to survive whatever Dream has planned for him or Wilbur next. All this talk of benevolence, saying he’s not *really* upset with Tommy, none of it changes that Tommy is just waiting for him to snap.

“Well, that’s all behind us now, right? I’ve put some distance between us and them, and they won’t be able to follow. It’s gonna be just like it was before,” Dream sighs, perfectly content. Tommy does not mistake this for peace. “Stalling was clever. I’m sure you guessed people were closing in when you saw me getting ready to leave, so the story about *limbo ending* or whatever, that was good. Not a bad lie. Did Wilbur come up with that one?”

Tommy says nothing. He can think of nothing to defend himself or Wilbur. He can only wait. He’s doing his best not to spiral and think of what Dream could be planning, but it’s no less petrifying to watch as Dream takes his time deciding how to pick him apart.

“Come on, why can’t we talk like we used to?” Dream whines, hoping for a reaction the same way a petulant child hopes for attention. “You know, Tommy, for a while there, I thought you’d finally accepted things. We worked together on experiments, you stopped asking for things you know you’re not allowed, that was *progress*.” Dream must love the sound of his own voice. Tommy won’t stop him, the longer he spends talking, the more time he has for rescue to arrive before Dream hurts him or Wilbur. “I’m hoping we can get to that again. And hey, maybe if you behave and grovel enough, I’ll let you see Wilbur again in a few years.”

*Years.* Tommy can’t hold back a shudder at the thought of this going on for so much longer. Hope is a double edged sword. He finally thinks this might not be his eternity, but it makes the thought of failure all the more horrifying. He’s so close.

“Until then, *you* need to pay for your part in all of this,” Dream leans against the wall across from him. He’s too calm. Why is the calm always so much worse than the anger? “Only question is how.” Dream assesses him as he weighs his options. “If I break your legs, that means I have to carry you everywhere.”

Tommy knew this was coming. There’s no point trying to run, but he doesn’t want to just wait for pain without some resistance. He glances to the doorway behind Dream.

“Ah, *ah*, I know what you’re thinking, Tommy. You’ll never make it,” Dream teases him. He has his axe now. “Hm, see, if I *blind* you– ha, *see* if I blind you– I don’t know if that carries over to limbo, and I need you to be my eyes over there!”

Tommy steps to the side, one step closer to the doorway. He knows he can’t get away, but he can’t bring himself to just wait for this to happen to him. He’s tired of being passive in his own hell.

“*Tommy.* You’ve gotten bold,” Dream laughs. “I thought you cared about your brother. You have to realize, whatever you do now falls back on him, right?”

Tommy stops trying to get to the door. He feels like his words are caught in his throat. He wants to beg for Wilbur’s life, he wants to tell Dream to just get it over with. Tommy can’t bring himself to speak. He needs help to get here faster. The waiting game is agony, he almost wonders if this terror would be easier to bear if he knew it was helpless, instead of every moment taunted by the fact that just maybe this pain could be avoided.

“This is fun and all, but first things first. You’re never going to be able to run away from me again. Don’t worry, I’ve already decided breaking your legs is too inconvenient, but come here,” Dream waves him over. “Come *here*. Really, Tommy, you know how this goes, you disobey, you hesitate, and you always end up doing what I want anyway, so come on. This part won’t even hurt!”

Tommy remains frozen against the opposite wall. He doesn’t want to walk into the end of a knife. He wants the weak solace of knowing he hadn’t been a willing victim in the end. Dream tuts him. “You’re annoying me again. Do I need to start talking about how I’ll tear Wilbur to pieces to get you moving?”

Tommy doesn’t hesitate again. Wilbur is the key, or maybe lock would be more appropriate. Now that Dream can hold Wilbur over him, Tommy will never be able to fight back again. Tommy can maybe have a moment of gratefulness that Dream hadn’t used Wilbur to control him before now. *You’re never going to be able to run away from me again.*

With Wilbur already keeping him here, Tommy doesn’t know what to expect, but he can only pray it won’t be permanent. He still has hope that they’re going to be rescued. That has to matter.

~

“Come on, Phil! I’m pretty sure it’s important, can you just check the library for me—” Ghostbur is still talking.

“Fuck— Fine, Ghostbur, I’ll be there in a second—” Phil descends from the staircase beside the library, the upper hall being empty. The rooms varied in their horror. One with a pool of water, one with a pool of lava, one a brewery for potions, and finally a room lit by redstone lamps, dried blood circling a drain in the stone floor. He resolved to tell Tubbo there was nothing up there of note.

“Go on without me! Speaking of important, I just remembered something!” Ghostbur drifts away, down the stairs further where Phil can see Ranboo and Tubbo, frozen side by side. Phil doesn’t know what Ghostbur wanted him to see, but he can’t help but hope that it might lead to Tommy. Doubtful.

Maybe not. It seemed Ghostbur *had* discovered something of note. Two of the bookshelves were pulled back, a lever tucked behind them which Ghostbur must have discovered while combing the books. Ghostbur hadn’t seemed to think there was any danger, but Phil keeps his sword ready and his shield in front of him.

A long, dark corridor extends into the black. Phil shivers, walking forward with slow, learned caution. He doesn’t know what else Dream might keep in his house of horrors.

*“I think it’s for you!”*

Ghostbur didn’t exactly put him at ease.

Phil can just make out a lever beside two blocks of obsidian set in the wall. He turns back. The light of the library feels distant now, this corridor kept this separate from the rest of Dream's works. He doesn't know why he's so full of dread, like some part of him knows something, a warning telling him to leave now. He pulls the lever.

Sword and shield clatter to the floor. Phil falls to his knees, reaching out with desperate, trembling hands as he rolls over the figure curled against the wall.

"Wil?! Wil, I'm here, it's—" Phil stops. He should never have let himself hope. Not even for a second.

Phil stares at his son's body, at the blood staining his chest, his throat slit like an animal bled for slaughter. Wilbur had struggled. Phil doesn't want to see it, to see the way his son died written in his blood but how can he not? He can see it in the way the blood had spread, soaking his chest. It doesn't look like Wilbur tried to stop the bleeding. His right hand is free of blood, like he was reaching for something beyond his own wounds, reaching for Tommy, trying to save him even as he died.

Phil takes a deep breath, a shuddering sob rising up against his bidding. Phil puts one trembling hand underneath Wilbur's head, the other wrapping around him, holding him like he's something precious. He's so light. Phil can feel his bones through his coat. Phil takes this as a familiar agony. Yet again he cannot remain in his grief, yet again he is needed, yet again there is a fight to be had, but he's just so *tired*. He wants to remain here, on his knees, cradling his son close to his chest and let this grief pour out of him until he can finally drown in it. Yet again his son is dead. He hadn't allowed himself hope. He hadn't wanted to consider the idea that Wilbur might be resurrected because he knew how much this part would hurt. Hope or not it's agony all the same.

Wilbur is still warm, his lifeless head falling against Phil's shoulder and Phil can only remember all the times Wilbur had buried his head in his shoulder and hugged back, back when Wilbur had felt safe in his dad's arms.

A matter of hours ago and Wilbur had still been alive.

"Oh— *god*—" Phil can only hold on tighter. Wilbur's coat doesn't smell like him anymore. It's overpowered by the scent of blood. Phil knows death well enough to know this body is no longer his son, but it had been him once, not long ago, this had been his Wilbur. So Phil can only hold him, like there's any way to protect him now. Phil shouldn't stay here, he shouldn't wait alone in the dark with nothing but a corpse, Tommy is still out there. They all still need him. "I'm s-sorry, damnit, Wil— I am so sorry, I am—" Phil allows himself one more moment, cradling his boy like he's still the child he remembers chasing after him, curious, wide-eyed, and too clever for his own good. He feels just as small now as he did back then.

Finally, Phil stands, still carrying Wilbur close to his chest. Phil makes it down that dark narrow corridor. He pauses as he hears voices. He doesn't want to do this, he wants his grief to remain a private thing, but he knows Wilbur isn't just his anymore. He never was. Phil returns to the main hall, making his way down those steps like he needs to take Wilbur somewhere, like he's trying to get him help, like there's anything to be done for him now.

Phil doesn't care about the clamoring around him, the surprise, the horror. He hears Niki scream Wilbur's name, he hears Eret cry out in disbelief, Jack's horror, Quackity's outrage.

Then there's just quiet.

Phil stops, all this empty space around him, he stands alone. He doesn't know what to do now. Phil can only hear the blood pounding in his ears, he feels like he should say something, should *do* something, staring at all of these horrified faces watching him, waiting. He doesn't know what to do.

Phil feels a hand on his shoulder. Phil turns to face his best friend, helpless and pleading, like Techno can somehow fix this for him. Techno just stares back with those big, sad eyes of his. So much understanding shared in a single gaze, enough that maybe for a moment Phil's grief, old and new and unyielding, can settle in his chest.

Ghostbur watches on, silent among the crowd. Not even he knows if he truly understands what he is seeing.

~

In another place and another time, a plane both separate and connected to the living world, Wilbur watches as finally he is mourned.

Dream took Tommy away from him. Unless Tommy dies, Wilbur won't be seeing him again. All he can do is watch as everyone he never got to atone to circle his dead body. All of them. Niki, Jack, Eret, Tubbo, Quackity, Techno, and Phil. His dad. His dad who killed him, his dad who tried to save him, his dad who he begged to put a sword through his chest.

Wilbur hasn't been an optimist in a very long time. He knows this world better by now. If they capture Dream alive, they won't be able to convince him to bring him back. Dream will hold Wilbur over Tommy for the rest of his life. If Wilbur is dead now, dead he will remain.

"I'm sorry, Phil... I never should've..." Wilbur mumbles into the empty hall, pacing alongside the platform. "I never should've asked that for you. I wish I... Wish I could tell you how sorry I am."

If Tommy gets out of this, maybe Wilbur can start learning how to forgive himself. So long as he's trapped here, and trapped he will remain, no one else will. Forgiving himself will have to be enough.

~

Tubbo can't look away. He looks at Wilbur and it hurts, of course it hurts, but he can only think of Tommy. He doesn't know why he feels relieved. They have no way of getting to Tommy. They've lost him. It would be better if Tommy were dead too, surely. He feels Ranboo tap on his shoulder.

"What's... What does that paper say?" He asks softly, nodding to the crumpled sheet in Tubbo's fist.

Tubbo is baffled at first. *Why* does Ranboo care about some nonsense from Ghostbur *now*? After all of this? He unrolls it.

-7300, 4800

Tubbo feels revived. “Coordinates. They’re– They’re *coordinates*–” Frantic, vicious hope returns in an instant. “Ghostbur– Ghostbur what is this?”

“Hm?” Ghostbur looks down at the paper curiously. “Oh! Tommy left that for me.”

Tubbo stares at him with wide, stunned eyes. “*Tommy?*”

“What’s happening?” Niki finally tears her eyes from Wilbur, looking instead to the echo sent back to haunt them.

“It’s a note from Tommy! Well, I think it was Tommy, it was his handwriting, he asked me to pass it along to Tubbo!” Ghostbur nods knowingly.

“Okay, that makes no sense,” Quackity folds his arms over his chest.

“Well, frankly, I don’t give a shit, I’m going,” Tubbo had gotten so lost in that hope for a moment, he’d forgotten about the body in the room. He turns to face Phil.

“I... I’ve got to get him home,” Phil’s voice trembles for a moment.

A weighted pause.

Then, Callahan steps up beside him, arms open.

“What?” Phil almost steps back. He doesn’t want anyone to hold Wil, Wilbur is his to protect, or maybe now just his burden to bear.

Callahan doesn’t move, just keeps his arms open, looking up at Phil, unwavering and steady.

Phil tries to read those black eyes, eyes maybe as old as him. He’s going to get him home safe. Phil lets go, putting Wilbur into Callahan’s arms like he’s trying not to wake him and Callahan accepts him just as gently.

Callahan heads for the portal.

Behind him, new plans stir. This doesn’t seem like it should be possible, a message from Tommy getting to them despite all odds. They shouldn’t be able to believe it, but somehow there is no doubt. Everyone there trusts Tubbo’s judgement, they trust in this message no matter how insane it may seem because they want this to work as much as he does. There’s something about it, all of them pushing past their own grief and fear and confusion because they know they’re needed. It makes Tubbo want to hope again.

“We have coordinates, we go through the Nether, don’t we? It’d be faster,” Sam points out.

“That’s– Fuck, what would those be in the Nether?” Quackity pauses. “Anyone feel like doing some math?”

“That would be about...” Techno types furiously on his communicator. “Uhhh. Maybe -900 600?”

“Can you be any more exact? That’ll have a wide range in the overworld.” Eret asks.

Techno shrugs.

Tubbo is already heading for the portal.

“Wait, Tubbo, you don’t even know what we’re walking into, Ghostbur didn’t explain, really–” Puffy follows close behind, as do the others.

“I don’t care. This is what we have to go on, so I’m going.” Only one thing makes Tubbo pause. He turns to Phil. “No one will blame you if you stop now.”

They have to go, but for a moment there’s a weighted pause between them, old tired eyes meeting young ones too war torn for his age. “I’ll blame me. So. Let’s go,” Phil looks to Techno. “Tommy is someone we can still save.”

Tubbo feels a swell of emotion in his chest he can’t quantify, some rumbling mess of pride and gratitude and hope driving him forward. He manages a nod. “Let’s bring him home, then.”

~

Dream does not use his axe, he doesn’t take out a knife or throw Tommy to the ground or any other machination of violence. He offers Tommy an enderpearl.

“What’re you..?” Tommy hesitates.

“What, you never seen a stasis chamber before? Come on, I’ll show you,” Dream steps up to the right pool and throws an enderpearl into its depths. The pearl shoots back to the top, where it remains unbroken. “Your turn.”

Tommy stares at the bubbling water, the pearl cool and smooth in his hand. He feels sick. He knows what happens now. He throws that pearl, he’s a dog on a leash. Even more than before, that is. As if he could leave Wilbur behind. Still, it’s not like he has a choice. He throws the pearl, staring at it, floating and waiting, like a chain around his soul.

*Help is coming. Help is coming and then it won’t matter what he has you tied to.*

“Good. Now no matter where you are, or where you go, I can get you back here!” Dream ruffles Tommy’s hair. “Should’ve done that *ages* ago. Now come on.” Dream nods him towards the exit. Dream seals the room off behind them. Tommy stares ahead. It’s a long corridor, lit by torches, going off in either direction, doorways branching off and at one end a nether portal. It reminds him of the tunnels he’d built connecting Manberg to Pogtopia.

Tommy has a swooping feeling in his stomach like he'd skipped a step. He hadn't thought about those days in a long time. Feels like a lifetime ago.

*You might see Tubbo again.*

Tommy buries the thought. It's too much for him to handle right now.

Tommy doesn't understand any of this. Dream hasn't punished him yet. He tried to *run away*, and Dream is almost acting like he does in one of his good moods.

"You know," Dream laughs, shaking his head. "You wanna know what it is, Tommy?"

*Oh, here it comes.*

Dream turns around to face him, arms folded over his chest, head tilted so Tommy knows Dream is looking right through him.

"I just don't know what I'm gonna do with you," Dream shrugs. "See, there reaches a point where no matter what I think of, it doesn't feel good enough. You disobeyed me in every way you could. So, I'm finding it hard to think of a fitting punishment." A pause, Dream waiting for every word to sink in, for the panic to fester inside of his captive audience. "Maybe I'll just... hurt Wilbur instead. You know what—" Dream laughs. "I know! I'll hunt down your little friends. I won't kill them, obviously, *you* don't deserve to have visits with them, but I'll definitely hurt them. Tubbo has got some pretty messed up scars from the Red Festival, what's a few more? You know what—" Dream steps closer and it's like Tommy can feel the fury radiating off of him, it's been boiling under the surface all this time, he's known that, he's just waiting for it to explode. "I will *raze L'Manberg to the ground* and maybe I'll bring you a bit of the rubble as a souvenir."

Tommy isn't scared. Not of this, anyway. Help is coming. Even if Tommy is doomed to remain trapped here forever, Dream is alone. His friends aren't. He won't be able to hurt them. Wilbur had told him how many people had come to save him. They won't let each other get hurt. That's something Dream has never been able to understand. He uses Wilbur against him, uses him against Wilbur, but Dream doesn't know what that means, not really.

Tommy knows there's nothing he can do to prevent Dream's violence on a whim. Maybe he should do what he's always done, maybe he should keep begging for mercy like it's ever made any difference. He doesn't want Dream to hurt Wilbur, that he knows Dream is very much capable of, but he also knows given the choice, between playing his role and fighting back, what Wilbur would rather he do.

Tommy laughs, high and panicked, but a laugh nonetheless. "*N-Nothing* you can do to me will fuckin' matter, Dream. I a-am *never* going to stop fighting you."

"Huh," Dream pauses for another moment before splitting his knuckles open against Tommy's face.

Tommy hits the stone bricks behind him, trying to catch himself against the wall, raising a hand to stop Dream from coming closer but Dream just pushes on.



“What’s it gonna take to get it through your thick skull–” Dream grabs him by the throat, slamming him back into the wall, Tommy’s head hitting stone so hard his vision flashes white. He refocuses on that mask leering closer, on a knife in Dream’s hand. “That your life is *mine*.” Dream holds on tighter, Tommy struggling for air, kicking weakly trying to get Dream to let go. “You know what, that’s it– I’m gonna carve my fucking name into your skin over and over until it finally *sticks*–”

The distant hum of the portal makes both of them freeze.

“Oh, that worked out well.”

Tommy hears Technoblade– that’s *Technoblade’s voice*– from down the corridor. Tommy looks to his left. From the other end of the tunnel, Tubbo stares back.

~

Getting to the coordinates is easy along the Nether roof, making the portal is easy as well. When they materialize on the other side, Techno is the first to realize what’s happened, that they must have linked up to Dream’s portal. It’s linear. Getting to this point had been so hard, so many failures and close calls and desperate hope left unknown and feeble, it’s disarming that the universe has placed them exactly where they need to be.

Then Tubbo sees him. Their eyes meet after so long apart and all it takes is a look for Tubbo to see it. He’d exiled his best friend. He’d hurt him. There is no anger in Tommy’s eyes, only a longing Tubbo knows he shares.

*Your Tommy.*

*Your Tubbo.*

Everything had told him that Tommy was still alive. Tubbo had told himself that he believed it, but he can’t pretend there hadn’t been that nagging, terrible doubt telling him this was all a lie. He would never get that lucky. They weren’t lucky people. But that’s Tommy, undeniably *there* and staring right back with wide, stunned eyes. Tubbo still doesn’t know how to comprehend seeing his best friend out of a grave. Especially when he still looks dead. They still aren’t lucky. Tubbo knows that that’s Tommy. Logically, he knows that face as well as he knows his own, but that does *not* look like Tommy. Tubbo didn’t know anyone could be that pale, blond hair now dirty and dark, dark circles around his eyes that they almost look bruised, the rest of him *is* bruised, a mess of purple blotches and dried blood, Tommy’s eyes are so *empty*, faded so they look grey, but they still stare back with wide, desperate pleading as Dream still keeps him pinned to the wall.

Before anyone can even take a step towards them, Dream drags Tommy toward the opposite end of the hall.

“Dream, get your fucking hands off of him!” Sapnap breaks the tense silence with a shout, firing a crossbow bolt inches from Dream’s head, before Dream holds Tommy between him and the oncoming crowd.

Dream keeps an arm around Tommy's throat, backing away slowly, he hits a button behind him. Redstone clicks as the door's mechanism opens. Tommy shuts his eyes as blinding light pours in. Dream keeps backing away.

"Stay back!" Dream snarls. "Stay back, or he loses an eye!"

"Give it up, Dream, you're trapped!" Ponk's voice joins in.

"Let him go or you're dead!" Jack's voice.

"Stop moving!" Sam's.

Tommy struggles to open his eyes, the sun so bright it hurts. Wilbur had told him that all of these people had gone to the vault for *him*. Seeing it is something else entirely. The first faces he's seen besides Wilbur's in months. Maybe years. Tommy also realizes this is the first time he's been outside in almost as much time, but he's too busy trying to breathe to appreciate it, although the smell of the air, as much as he can smell right now, it's arid and warm, but there's *wind*. Tommy hasn't felt wind in so long, the soft breeze tugs at his hair and that feels like being saved in its own right. They're in a mesa biome, the sun beating down on them, red sand burning his bare feet, and it seems like Ponk is right. They're in a valley. Dream would have to climb his way out and keep his hostage between him and the group. That doesn't make Tommy feel any more saved. Dream would rather kill him than give him up. Tommy is still fighting to pull Dream's arm from his throat, it's getting harder and harder to breathe.

"I'd drop the crossbow, Sapnap!" Dream keeps backing away. Tommy chokes on a whimper as Dream brings the knife close to his left eye. Tommy wants to tell Sapnap to shoot, he wants to tell them to do whatever it takes, Tommy would rather lose an eye than let Dream disappear with him again. Tommy won't get that chance. Tommy's head is pounding, his lungs burning, clawing at Dream's arm around his throat. He's too weak. It's getting harder and harder to fight back.

His vision is growing blurred, but he still looks for Tubbo in the crowd, not because he can say anything, no way to thank Tubbo for trying, or to tell him he forgives him, or that he's sorry, but just for some reassurance. He doesn't find him. His grip on Dream's arm grows slack. He stops struggling.

"*Tommy!*" Tubbo steps forward as Tommy goes limp.

"Don't fucking move Tubbo or I'll break him," Dream still holds a knife, pointing it at Tubbo like an accusation.

Techno finds what happens next oddly familiar.

Dream tenses in surprise, his mask cracking and falling away to reveal wide, startled eyes before blood covers his vision, the tip of a crossbow bolt sticking through his skull. Techno realizes where he recognizes it from, it feels familiar because Dream goes down the same way Tommy did all that time ago. For Dream it was too quick, Techno thinks, but any slower Dream would've had the chance to hurt Tommy worse.

Dream and Tommy both collapse to the ground, standing behind them, Ghostbur stares down at a crossbow in mild surprise. “Hm. Don’t know why I did that. Just felt like I had to.”

“Tommy!” Tubbo runs forward the moment they hit the ground, shoving Dream’s bloody corpse aside, turning Tommy over, red sand staining his face like blood. “Tommy *please!*” Tubbo shakes him desperately.

“We need potions– A health potion, strength, *something*– come on!” Quackity falls beside him, Ponk close behind, a potion in hand. Half of their party remains circling the group on the ground, the others head for the tunnel. Dream’s body despawns soon after. He’s got two lives left. Maybe they can still catch him before he disappears.

“Here, Tubbo, let me,” Ponk reaches past him, tilting the potion back into Tommy’s mouth. “Strength too, he s-should– He’s gonna be okay, he’s gonna be okay–”

He’s not moving.

Tubbo and Phil understand more about each other now. Both know the pain of grieving someone twice, when they’d both been weak enough, both had loved them enough, to think for a moment they could be saved. Tubbo chokes back a sob, holding Tommy close.

Ranboo puts an arm around him, “Tubbo…”

“Let go! He’s– He’s got to– w-we saved him! *We saved him!*” Tubbo just pulls away, not looking at Ranboo, not looking at any of them.

Tommy is so still in his arms. This can’t– He can’t lose him. Not again, not after all of this. “Wake up, Tommy, y-you can’t– Please just *wake up!*”

Tommy tenses in his arms. *Wake up.*

“D-Don’t ever say that to me again,” Tommy mumbles hoarsely into Tubbo’s shoulder.

“*Tommy?!*” Tubbo pulls back, holding onto him tightly.

“*Ow*, careful, I’m fuckin’ wounded…” Tommy grumbles, still squinting in the harsh light.

“Oh my god– You’re–” Tubbo stammers, a hysterical laugh slipping out as he pores over Tommy, conscious across from him.

“Alive? Yeah, guess I am,” Tommy doesn’t know how he manages some dry sarcasm. It dies just as quickly, an ache deepening in his chest. His voice breaks. “Y-You’re here, you– you came for me,” Tommy reaches out thin, weak arms, wrapping them around Tubbo and burying his face in Tubbo’s shoulder, sobs caught in his throat, relief and loss turning together inside of him. “You’re actually *here*–”

“I was never gonna stop looking,” Tubbo hugs him back just as tightly, if not gently. Tommy is so thin, Tubbo can feel his bones as Tommy holds on weakly, shaking in his arms, but he’s *alive*. He’s breathing and he’s *here* and Tubbo won’t let anything happen to him ever again.

*"Tommy!"*

Tommy whimpers at that familiar voice, holding onto Tubbo so tight it almost hurts.

"Get off me— Don't fucking touch me—" Dream snarls, trying to fight free of Sapnap and Bad's hold on him. He's wearing a Netherite chestplate, a sword on the ground behind him. He'd respawned and immediately started trying to gear up before his old friends grabbed him. He doesn't seem to realize he's been beaten. "Tommy, come here, right now!"

Tubbo looks back at Dream over his shoulder, not letting go of Tommy, hatred roiling in his chest. He's going to tear that man apart.

"You owe me your life a thousand times over! You owe me *Wilbur!*" Dream ignores the rest of them. His eyes only remain set on Tommy, wide and furious and demanding. Even now he thinks Tommy will obey. He hadn't had time to get a mask back on.

Tommy finally pulls away from his best friend, taking a deep, shaking breath, holding onto fistfuls of Tubbo's shirt as he tries to steady himself, staring at the red dirt between them.

"C-Can I... Can I borrow your axe?"

Tubbo nods, helping him stand. He hands the axe to Tommy, the blade pressed to the ground so Tommy can use it to support himself. Tommy has no intention of using it as a cane. If he wanted something to help him stand he'd just keep holding onto Tubbo. He wants a weapon. Tommy sways dangerously as he weighs the axe in his hands, but he stays standing.

Tubbo realizes Tommy walks with a limp as he staggers forward across the sand, he moves to follow, but he can feel that he's not meant to. Tommy has to do this alone. Puffy steps forward when Tommy starts to fall, but he just shakes his head, catching himself with grim determination.

"What're you gonna do with that Tommy?" Dream sneers, mocking and belittling even now, even as Sapnap and Bad keep him trapped between them. "You're gonna hit me? *Really*, when has that ever worked out for you? You owe me *everything* you are. Put the axe down," Dream manages to yank himself free, staggering forward so he and Tommy are eye to eye.

Tommy flinches back in spite of himself.

Dream scoffs, smug and sure. As long as Tommy still flinches, he is in control. "Is this any way to treat your only friend?"

Tommy holds onto his axe tighter. Bad steps forward to pull Dream back, but Tommy just shakes his head.

"That's more like it. Better. Tell them to back off," Dream doesn't even hesitate. He doesn't sound like he's scared or bargaining, he sounds so *sure*.

Right until Tommy slams the axe into his chest. Dream collapses back to the ground, the sound of netherite colliding reverberates throughout the valley, it resonates like the ringing of the bell in Church Prime, like a prayer manifest in Tommy breaking Dream open. There's

something holy in that, even as he staggers, the fact that he's still standing at all is a miracle, but he's not weak. Not anymore. He stands over Dream, the axe dragging on the ground, his arms weak and trembling from a single blow. Dream stares at him with wide, stunned eyes. Tommy stares back equally shocked, breathing hard. He raises the axe again.

“Tommy, *stop*—”

Another resounding clang as Tommy puts another dent into Dream's chestplate. He's not wearing a helmet. Tommy could have killed him already. He could've made it quick. He raises the axe.

“You owe me—”

Dream tries to get back, scrambling in the dirt, but Sapnap and Bad block the way behind him as Tommy brings down the axe on him again.

“*Please!* You don't want to do this—”

Again.

“Y-You're making a m-mistake—”

Over and over.

“We were *friends*—!”

Tommy pauses only once. “You have caused me nothing but pain, and now it's your turn.”

Dream stops begging when his ribs crack and break.

Tommy doesn't stop.

He brings the axe down even as his arms ache, as he stumbles and begins to collapse, he steadies out and brings the axe down again.

No one tries to stop him, not even as blood seeps from around the armor and spreading onto the sand, red staining red as bones are crushed by dented metal.

No one stops him for a long time.

Not until Dream's body despawns and Tommy is still raising the axe.

“Tommy...”

Tommy flinches when he feels a hand on his arm, light and careful. Tommy looks up at Ranboo, eyes red and green, there's no purple but that doesn't change what Tommy saw. All of these people had come here to get him out, but Ranboo came for him first.

He's still holding onto the axe. Silence except for Tommy's trembling breathing. He feels like he's a moment away from screaming, if he starts he might never stop.

Ranboo gently takes the axe from him. "It's okay. It's okay, you can let go, Tommy." An epitaph no more. "You can let go now."

Tommy lets Ranboo take it from him. He lets Ranboo hold onto him to keep him standing. He feels Tubbo put an arm around him on his other side. "He's... He's gonna come back," Tommy looks towards the tunnel, still wincing in the light. It's too much. All of it is too much. "He will."

"We'll get him, Tommy. We left Ant and Sam to watch the tunnels," Sapnap tells him. He does his best not to linger on Tommy's bruised face, on the fact that his best friend put those there alongside innumerable scars.

No one has mentioned that they're all doing their best not to stare at him, no one has acknowledged that it's hard to look at him and not *hurt* because Tommy just isn't right. He's a mess of scars and bruises and he flinched when Ranboo stepped beside him and he flinched when Tubbo stopped too close and he looks a second away from collapse.

"Dream killed me," Tommy's voice grows soft. He says it like he's trying to defend himself from something. His eyes hurt from the light, his feet burn from the sand, his arms ache and his palms feel raw from swinging the axe over and over.

He feels Tubbo take his hand. Tubbo doesn't want to think about the grooves on Tommy's hands, raised scars around his fingernails. He thinks of the dark cell. "I know," Tubbo replies just as softly, and there is no way Tubbo can understand, not really, but those words somehow are enough. Him being there at all is enough.

Tommy shuts his eyes, taking a deep, trembling breath. It's like it hasn't quite sunk in yet, that he's safe. "Where's Wilbur?"

"Tommy..." Tubbo sounds wounded. He doesn't know how to tell him.

"Where is he?" Tommy is so tired. "D-Dream said he hurt him, so— so we've got to get to him."

"Tommy, he's not..."

"No," Tommy says sharply. He can hear it in Tubbo's voice, he can hear it and it terrifies him. "No, he's— Where is he? He's— He's hurt," Tommy's voice breaks. "Where's Dream? We'll— We'll get him back, then, b-because—"

"Ant?" Bad shouts back down the hall. Tommy flinches at the sound. Ant steps out into the corridor.

"He's not here," Ant shrugs.

"What the fuck do you mean he's not here?" Quackity shouts.

"We're at where he spawned last time. He's just not here," Ant doesn't have any answers.

“He’ll come back,” Tommy won’t acknowledge the growing dread inside of him, the growing panic.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because he wouldn’t leave without me,” Tommy tries to force some strength into his tone, his voice is broken and hoarse, but he tries to sound strong.

“Tommy, Wilbur’s not—”

“Not Wilbur. Dream,” Tommy says sharply.

Tubbo looks to Ranboo with wide eyes. He feels sick, there’s unspoken horror between them, knowing every word Tommy says reflects something unknowable and vile. He knows they couldn’t have, he knows they did everything they could, but Tubbo can’t bury the thought that they should’ve saved him sooner.

“S-So, he’s got to be here. And if he’s here, he’ll— He’ll bring back Wilbur, we’ll *make him* bring him back,” Tommy is holding onto Tubbo’s hand as tightly as he can. It’s been so long since he’s had someone to hold onto. “W-We’ll make him bring him back.”

“Ant, are you sure?” Sapnap calls.

“He’s not here, guys. He’s just not.”

Sapnap leaves them, going to look for himself.

“T-There’s a—” Tommy stops, pulling away from Tubbo to press his hands into his eyes. “Hurts...” He mumbles.

“What hurts, Tommy?” Tubbo asks softly.

“My eyes... it’s too bright, it hurts,” Tommy sighs, struggling to refocus. “T-There’s a stasis chamber. In one of the rooms. Dream will— Dream has one.”

“You got it, Tommy,” Sapnap nods.

“We can go, Tommy. Come on, we can— We’ll get you armor, alright? A-And we can just go home,” Tubbo keeps a gentle hand on Tommy’s shoulder, holding on so lightly like he’s scared he might break him.

“N-No, no!” Tommy pulls away again. “Not without— We need Dream. We need Dream so we can get Wil back, we—” Tommy’s lip trembles as he buries tears. Dream always got more annoyed when he cried.

Then Tommy is in the dark, he panics, backing away from the figures around him, he’s dead again, he must be, he’s back in limbo, he *must* be, so where’s Wilbur, he needs Wilbur—

“Tommy! Tommy, it’s okay, you’re okay,” Sapnap steps out of the dark. “I’m really sorry, man, we didn’t— I didn’t know one of them was for you—”

“P-Please, please don’t–” Tommy’s voice cracks as he raises his hands to protect his face, before he realizes no one is touching him, no one is about to hit him. It’s just Sapnap and Sam. He’s okay. Dream isn’t here. “S-Sorry...”

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Sapnap keeps his hands raised passively, his sword put away. “We’re about to do the other one, if you want to wait outside...?”

Tommy manages a nod, heading for the doorway. Everything hurts. He feels weak. He starts to fall. Sam grabs his arm before he can hit the ground, letting go the moment Tommy pulls away, cowering against the wall.

“Sorry, Tommy, I shouldn’t have done that,” Sam steps back.

“It’s... it’s fine...” Tommy mutters. He feels sick. Everyone is looking at him like he’s made of glass, like he’s a second away from becoming a ghost.

Tommy returns to the hall, Tubbo is by his side in a second.

“Oh my god, Tommy, you just– you disappeared,” Tubbo hugs him tightly. “I didn’t know– We thought–” *We thought we’d lost you again.*

“Stasis chamber... Dream made me... He had me set one up so if I t-ried to leave again...”

“Oh.”

Tommy turns back to look into the dark room. Sapnap and Sam have their swords at the ready. Tommy steps behind Tubbo as they shut it. The pearl breaks.

Dream doesn’t show.

“What..?” Sapnap stares. This shouldn’t be possible. All eyes turn back to Tommy.

“N-No, no I saw him– I saw him set it up, h-he should be here,” Tommy stumbles forward. Fear sinks its teeth in deeper. This didn’t make sense, the wrongness of it fills the air and all of them feel lost. Dream isn’t just gone, he’s *gone*. In a way none of them can fully comprehend. Tommy feels like he can’t breathe. “Where is he?! He– He wouldn’t leave without me, s-so where the fuck– I need Wilbur. Where’s– I need Wilbur–”

“Tommy...” Tubbo doesn’t know how to tell him.

“We’re... We’re gonna find Dream. We’re gonna get him. A-And then we’ll have Wilbur,” Tommy stares at the ground. He can’t look at their faces, all of them staring at him with that knowing pity. “I n-need Wilbur, *please*– We have to– We have to save Wil!”

"Tommy..."

"Stop, stop, stop– Don't say that!" Tommy is struggling to breathe. "D-Dream is still out there, a-and that's–" *That terrifies me.* "–That means we can still get to Wil, right?!" Tommy finally looks at them, frantic and pleading. He needs them to say yes. He needs them to lie to him.



"Okay, it's okay, Tommy," Ranboo knows. "We'll figure it out."

That calms Tommy for the moment. It's surprising that he hasn't fainted yet, he's been pushing himself so hard.

"Er, Tommy, I have..." Eret had followed them into the tunnel, they interrupt gently, unsure and concerned.

Tommy manages to look at them. Eret frowns, some serious thought persisting. They hesitate for a weighted moment, turning back to the other people around them uncertainly before facing Tommy again. They take off their sunglasses, offering them to him. They pretend not to notice people gasp and step back at the sight of their white eyes. Their focus remains on Tommy. Tommy has flinched at every sound, every sudden move. He looks Eret in the eye with out fear.

"For the... for the sun."

Tommy stares at them for a moment before accepting shakily. He knows how much this means. Eret doesn't take off their glasses for anything. "Thank you, Eret. I'd... I-I'd ask for the crown, but you're the real King of the SMP, eh?" Tommy manages a hoarse laugh. Eret smiles at that.

"Tommy, I know I'm not Wilbur, but... but I can pretend I am! Remember? Like before?"

That voice feels like a slap to the face, like Wilbur but not. Tommy's shaky smile falls. Ghostbur hovers nearby, looking at him uncertainly. He doesn't understand, not properly, but he's worried all the same.

"Hi, Ghostbur..." Tommy puts on the glasses. His eyes are watering. "It's okay. You don't have to do that, I—" Tommy takes a trembling breath, he reaches for Tubbo, who steps up to take his hand in an instant. "Can we go home?"

"Of course, boss man," Tubbo looks to the rest of them gathered. "We'll get you some armor, and then we can go, right?"

"Right... I dunno... I dunno if I'll be able to walk that far," Tommy doesn't know why he's trying not to cry.

Ranboo puts his arm around him, supporting his weight. "I can carry you?"

Tommy breaks. He lets Ranboo support him, sobs uncontainable now, he clings to Ranboo's shirt with trembling, weak hands as all of this weight threatens to bury him, but Ranboo doesn't let go. He can feel Tubbo beside him. He's not leaving him. He's going home. He's safe. They saved him. So why doesn't it feel like he made it out?

*"You're my brother and I love you."*

He never said it back.

~

Wilbur struggles to see through a ghost's eyes, trying to piece together something between a dream and a memory.

He sees Tommy. He sees Dream holding him, a knife in hand.

"Please please please don't let this be it..." Wilbur paces erratically, hands clasped in front of him as if in prayer. "They've got to get to him, they've got to..."

His ghost circles the crowd. Dream doesn't pay any mind to him.

"Do it... Do it— Come on, fucking shoot him already—" Wilbur can see the crossbow. He knows he couldn't actually do anything, but he put every thought, everything he had into begging his ghost to fire. "YES! Thank fuck— Oh my god, yes— he's— he's down. That stupid ghost isn't useless after all!"

Ten agonizing minutes pass before he can make out what happens next.

He sees Tommy with Tubbo, with so many others. He's okay. Well, not okay, but he's going to be.

"HA!" Wilbur shouts into the empty station, fists in the air, jumping, a mad, joyous laugh filling the room. "They fucking got him out! They got him!" Wilbur feels tears wet his cheeks, but he knows they're from relief. Tommy made it out.

He can die happy.

Wilbur is breathing hard, he goes quiet, smiling. He looks back at the art covering the wall, at the books scattered across the floor, the guitar, the simple comforts he's gained. He steps closer slowly, footsteps echoing as he pores over every piece of Tommy left behind. So many little blue sheep. A cow, a flower, a L'Manberg flag. Wilbur brushes a hand against the shaky drawing of Tommy and Ghostbur, smiling under a blue sun. Wilbur exhales a soft laugh, unbelievably fond.

He turns around with a contented sigh, leaning against the wall. Slowly, he slides to the ground. The silence presses in. The smile slips from his face. A whimpering sob escapes and Wilbur buries his head in his hands, knees tucked into his chest, as he remains alone underneath all he has left of his little brother.

## Chapter End Notes

Oooh where's Dream huh,,, suspicious :)

I continue to be amazed by super sweet comments and cool fanart and stuff from you all. You can always send fanart/theories/general screaming to me at my tumblr, [peninkwrites](https://www.tumblr.com/peninkwrites). I also reblog fanart in my tddd tag which I highly recommend. Like holy shit you're all so talented.

So. Thank you. So much.

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

No specific warnings for this one I don't think! Maybe a little derealization? It's not happy, exactly. I'll tell you that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy wanted to be able to walk himself back. He hadn't dared to consider he'd one day return home, but now he imagined if he had, he would've wanted to return home brave and steady, a survivor, not a victim. He'd been strong enough to swing that axe over and over, but that was the last of his strength. He needs Ranboo to keep standing. Armor didn't fit him anymore either. It remained loose and hurt already bruised skin. Tommy's hands shook too much for him to tighten the straps himself, and he kept on flinching when people tried to help him.

"We'll keep you safe without it, Tommy," Tubbo sounds so sure. Mostly he's doing his best not to think about how hurt Tommy still is. Once they get home, he'll get him a health potion, they'll get him cleaned up. Tubbo can deal with surface level wounds. The rest of it he has no idea what to do with. He doesn't want to think about how the last time he saw Tommy alive, he'd been letting Dream drag him away, the next time Dream returns a bruised corpse, and then he finally saw Tommy alive again and Dream had his fucking hands on him. The moment they arrived, Dream was already hurting him. How can that not convince him that the hurt had been constant? Tubbo didn't *do* this, he knows that, but he can't help but think he let it happen. He hasn't looked Tommy in the eye since he'd first hugged him. He doesn't know if he'll be able to.

Tommy trusts him. Both of them. Ranboo doesn't have Tubbo's history, but he found Tommy when no one else did. *Somehow*, Ranboo showed up in his cell, healed him, and Tommy assumes is part of how they found him in the end. He should probably ask him about that.

"Fuckin' undignified..." Tommy mutters when Ranboo puts an arm around him.

"Well, can you walk that far? We're going on the Nether roof, but it's still a little ways," Ranboo asks doubtfully.

Tommy's feet aren't bloody and torn up from his last trip into the Nether, they had healed mostly on resurrection, but he still doesn't have shoes. He's so tired.

"...No," Tommy hates this. He doesn't want to be helpless anymore.

"I can carry you too, Tommy, if Ranboo doesn't think he can manage it," Tubbo offers.

“Right, *you* little bee boy are gonna carry *me*. Ranboo’s got... like enderman strength or some shit. He’s magic, he can carry blocks ‘n shit when he shouldn’t be able to,” Tommy doesn’t want to be ashamed of being weak, but it’s hard not to be.

Tubbo doesn’t tease back, knowing he could carry Tommy easily, he just smiles, beaming at Tommy like his grumpy sarcasm is a gift. It unsettles Tommy a bit.

Ranboo sighs, crouching down. “Come on, then. If you don’t wanna feel *undignified* or whatever, get on my back.”

Tommy laughs, barking and hoarse. He almost sounds like himself. He gives Ranboo a teasing look. “Alright, then. Promise not to strangle you,” Tommy puts his arms over Ranboo’s shoulders.

Ranboo stands and tries not to think about how unnervingly light Tommy is, everything about him is so thin.

Tommy has a moment of panic as they pass through the portal. With the sunglasses on, the Nether roof looks like if his Limbo had a sky. He quickly pushes them back, blinking in the soft blue light, bedrock the only thing for miles.

“You okay there, Tommy?” Ranboo felt him hold on tighter.

“Fine. I’m fine...” Tommy mutters. He rests his head on Ranboo’s shoulder. This is better. When Tommy was too hurt to move, Dream would carry him in his arms. It’s strange and maybe a bit wrong, but Tommy feels safer knowing he *could* strangle Ranboo if he had to to get him to put him down. He’s at least a little less vulnerable. And Ranboo doesn’t have his arms around him, so if Tommy needed to escape, Ranboo would have a harder time grabbing him, if he tried to hold onto his legs Tommy could pull him down with him. He needs to stop thinking like this. He’s alive and the people he’s with he doesn’t *need* an escape plan from. It’s not a matter of not trusting Ranboo, Ranboo is one of the few people he *can* trust anymore, this goes for everyone. *Everyone*. Even with Tubbo, he can’t help but think of the distance between Tubbo’s axe and his face. If that’s how he is with the people he loves the most, how the fuck is he ever going to function with anyone? He doesn’t know how he’s going to learn to not always be waiting for an attack. Maybe Dream was right. He cannot survive on his own, but he’s scared he can’t survive *with* anyone either.

“Hey! Wait a sec, we’ll walk you back!” Techno follows them through the portal alongside Phil.

Tubbo turns back to them, almost defensive. He wants to get Tommy away from all of this, even those who came to help. Tommy deserves some peace. “We’ve got him.”

“Um. Yeah. You needed like, ten guys to go fight Dream, but if you run into him on the way home, you’ll be fine,” Techno says dryly.

“Got a point, don’t he?” Tommy says into Ranboo’s shoulder. No wonder Tommy is still making escape plans, that’s what he *has* to do when he’s still being hunted.

“Yeah, hey, Tommy—” Techno hears him speak and jogs to catch up. “I, uh. I got somethin’ for you, it’s kinda... eh, it’s kinda gross right now, but thought you might want it.”

Tommy eyes him warily, expecting the worst. Dream’s surprises tended to end up being a knife in the back.

Techno rummages in his inventory, hesitating once more, feeling Tubbo’s scrutinizing eyes on him, before extending a hand, delicately holding a tattered green bandana stained with blood.

“S-So that’s where that went... thought he... thought he might’ve taken it off me when I was dead or some shit,” Tommy takes it, holding onto it tightly like he’s scared to lose it.

Techno assumes Tommy means he thought he lost it when he ran to his place. He isn’t sure if he should tell Tommy he found it abandoned at Logstedshire, left behind alongside the compass, that Tommy is probably right and Dream had taken it off him and left it in the ruins. Techno, before he can resolve to explain or not, is distracted by something else.

“Dude... where’s your finger?” Technoblade has never been the most tactful.

Tommy winces, looking down at his left hand, still holding onto the bandana, his missing index finger is no longer an open wound but it feels like something unhealed all the same. “s’ gone, innit? And, not like it was an accident, eh?” That one sentence is weighed by violence.

Tubbo looks back at him, staring at his hand with wide eyes, mouth hanging open like he wants to say something. Ranboo stops, looking back over his shoulder, Tommy nearly nose to nose. Phil, who had just caught up to them, pauses.

Tommy balls his hand into a fist, hiding it best he can. He can feel all of them staring at him. Were the bruises not enough? He knows he must look half dead, he *knows* he’s so fucking skinny now, he can see it all the time, feel his own bones aching and poking out too far, hell—the first time these people saw him again alive, it was with Dream keeping him pinned to the wall with a hand around his throat and a knife about to cut into him. They can *stop fucking staring now*. They’ve seen it all. They know he’s broken.

“Aren’t we trying to get home?” Phil cuts in, resolutely not looking at Tommy. He doesn’t need one more person looking at him like he’s a tragedy.

The others take the hint.

“Right, let’s— let’s keep going then,” Tubbo turns and leads the way. He tries to ignore that he feels sick to his stomach. Ranboo walks behind him, his focus only on holding Tommy steady. Tommy is doing his best not to fall asleep, which isn’t too difficult, the adrenaline hasn’t yet faded. Dream is still out there somewhere. Techno walks beside them, almost embarrassed for pointing out the injury, Phil nudges him teasingly.

Techno turns back to Tommy, returning to his inventory. “Oh! Wait, uh, I also have your... Tubbo... compass... thing, but it’s broken. It’s got bits of glass broken off. So, I dunno if

it's safe— You know what, I'll hold onto it, see if I can make it less dangerous,” Techno nods awkwardly, shoving the compass back in his inventory. He laughs nervously. “I, uh, I actually wanted to talk to you—”

Tommy reaches out a hand, holding onto Ranboo tighter with the other. He presses it against Techno's face, in some clumsy, messy approximation of shushing him, more so squishing his cheek. “Hey... How about we talk about... *that* later, Mr. Blade, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah, that's fine, Tommy,” Techno brushes him off with an eye roll and a weak smile. He had known it would be even more tactless to bring up Tommy's death in the immediate aftermath of all this, but it felt weird to ignore it. This works better.

“But ay, Techno?” Tommy calls him back.

“What?”

“Thanks for... for showing up,” Tommy manages a smile, before resting his head against Ranboo's shoulder again.

Techno shrugs. “It was nothin’.”

It's strange, the Nether is always so warm, but above on the roof, that endless sky above cools it. This is more familiar to Tommy than the blinding sun and dry, hot winds of the mesa. It's darker here, quiet. Tommy doesn't want to fall asleep. He's so scared of where he'll wake up, if he closes his eyes he'll open them not to his friends, nor even a train station, but only darkness, or worse, a white mask staring down at him. But he can see Tubbo ahead of him, he can see Dream's axe bloody at his side, Tubbo ready to use it to protect him. Ranboo keeps close to him, holding onto Tommy, steady and calm. Technoblade, the man who had almost been his savior, who had stayed beside him until the end, and his brother's father are the ones watching their backs. Tommy hasn't felt this safe in months.

Ranboo feels Tommy's hold on him loosen, but Ranboo won't drop him, half hunched over so Tommy doesn't fall back, he looks to his left, Tommy's head resting on his shoulder, his eyes closed now, breathing less shaky and instead slow and easy. Ranboo does his best to walk carefully.

Tubbo looks back at the two of them, to Tommy finally at peace. Tubbo's serious gaze softens, he meets Ranboo's eyes, or rather somewhere close to them, and gives him a smile, hoping that's enough that Ranboo knows how grateful he is.

Tommy only sleeps until they get to the portal, its hum and the feeling of the world bending around them wake Tommy easily. He clings to Ranboo like he's scared they're going to leave him behind.

“You good, man?” Ranboo asks.

“Didn't... Wasn't sure if I was gonna still be here...” Tommy mutters. All of this feels temporary. He's just waiting for the penny to drop, for this to have been some cruel delusion of limbo, for Dream to appear and take him away again. Tommy is distracted from his gloom

by their surroundings. He's at the main portal. He's *back* in the mainlands of the SMP. The sun had set while they were traversing the Nether, the last hues of red and orange are disappearing over the distant horizon, soft, blue light replacing it, the night air clean and cool. Tommy can't remember the last time he smelled *grass*. It smells like summer.

"You're here, Tommy," Ranboo's tone is soft and worried. "You're staying with us. I mean, as long as you want to be here."

"Definitely don't want to be somewhere else..." Tommy manages a smile. He doesn't know how long he slept, but he's as exhausted as he was before. He doesn't know if he'll ever get rid of that bone deep weariness. "I wanna go home. Can I..? I wanna walk myself." It's not a question, exactly, but something about his tone almost sounds like he's asking for permission. Ranboo resolves to ignore it.

"Right, sure thing," Ranboo lets go slowly, sure that Tommy has his footing.

Tommy keeps one hand on Ranboo's shoulder as he sways dangerously. He takes a deep breath. His bruised ribs ache. He lets go, Tubbo reaches out to catch him but Tommy quickly waves him off. He has a destination in mind. Tommy makes it down the stone steps toward the community house, but he pauses.

"Gimme... Gimme a minute," he mutters, stumbling forward, one hand on the wall of stone beside him. Tommy steps off the path.

There's *grass* beneath his feet, cool and soft and wet with dew. There's earth, *real* dirt, not the dry, cracked vestiges of a savanna, nor the red sand of the mesa, but even those things were intangible in his memory, too old or too tainted by terror to really count, *this* is real. He feels it. Tommy slides to the ground, leaning against the wall. Tommy digs his hands in the ground, grabbing fistfuls of grass and loose dirt. It tickles at his bare skin, so unused to anything besides hard edges of stone or knives or violent hands. Tommy rips it from the ground, smelling it, overwhelming and heady, but he can't seem to stop. He knows his eyes are watering. It's okay if he cries, he just doesn't want to break down into sobs, not yet. He knows he must already seem crazy, but he really doesn't want to crumble over being outside. He would've started rolling in the mud if he hadn't been reminded of his entourage, watching him with far too much pity. He knows they won't judge him for this, but he still hates it. He hates that none of them can look at him the same.

"Oy, can't a man appreciate some dirt in peace? Quit staring! I'm not *that* pathetic. Just haven't seen dirt in a while," Tommy grumbles, managing to get to his feet. "And I'm already fuckin' disgusting, if anything the dirt will make it better."

"Sure thing, bossman. If it helps, your house is sort of *made* of dirt, so, not a bad thing to return to," Tubbo laughs softly. Phil had warned him that Tommy might not be how he remembered him, and that is brutally, cosmically true. But he's still his Tommy in every way that matters. He knows Phil's warning won't fade any time soon, that he'll still see parts of Tommy he doesn't recognize, even more than the scars he already has seen, but he can't help but take solace in the fact that Tommy is still in there somewhere, under the blood and the haunted eyes and the terror, there's still Tommyinnit, loud and delighted by the very dirt beneath his feet.



“Alright, alright, I’m coming,” Tommy sighs, quick to rejoin them. He looks up at Ranboo. “You’re too tall.” Tommy puts a hand on Tubbo’s shoulder instead. “I’m *fine*,” he grumbles when Tubbo steps closer to him, like he’s waiting to catch him. “Just need... just need a little help is all.”

Tommy wants to look around, he wants to see the server, to see what’s changed and what hasn’t, but that almost scares him more. All he’s really capable of right now is looking down at the prime path and putting one foot in front of the other. It’s been so long, Tommy doesn’t want to think about how long it’s been, if it’s truly been years, or if it’s been less than a year why it feels like lifetimes. Time spent dead should count, he thinks. He doesn’t know if that makes it worse or better. Even after all this time the prime path is still familiar to him. He recognizes grooves in the wood, places where he had replaced rotted or blown up planks. None of the wood looks new anymore. Without him there, no one had maintained it.

Tommy knows when to look up. He stumbles, dragging his feet, but Tubbo keeps him upright. The bench. The little house in the side of the hill.

He’s home.

“You alright?” Tubbo asks when Tommy stops.

“Wot-? Oh, yeah, yeah, I’m good,” Tommy keeps walking. His home is colder than it once was, when he had been taken from it, he’d left it made of smooth stone. Stronger that way. He reaches the open doorway alone, leaning against it. It’s lighter in here, only a few lanterns, but better than the moonlight.

A figure walks out of his back room.

“AH!” The figure screams.

Tommy staggers back onto the lawn, falling to the ground and covering his face, waiting for a blow. Tubbo is in front of him with his axe in an instant.

“Whoa, Tommy, sorry, man! Wasn’t, uh, wasn’t expecting to see you here!” Connor, white as a sheet, holds a hand over his racing heart. “Cool that you’re back, though! I guess I should... I should probably get out of here, huh?” He says this more gloomily. “You can put down the axe, Tubbo. Me and Tommy are on good terms! You let me stay in your house, man, I owe you one!”

Tommy runs a hand through his hair, tugging at it, letting the pain ground him, trying to steady his breathing. Just Connor. It’s just Connor.

“So, uh,” Connor scuffs his feet awkwardly. “Sorry I didn’t realize you were being kidnapped. If I’d known I woulda said something.”

“W-What?” Tommy sighs, hunched forward, head in his hands, rocking slightly. His heart won’t stop racing. He knows Ranboo, Techno, and Phil are watching him.

“Oh, you know, when Dream brought you back to life that one time. Saw you guys leave, I was watching from my— from *your* house.”

“You— I thought—” Tommy is alert again, sitting up and staring up at him. “You *saw* me?”

“Uh, yeah, I did!” Connor’s light tone seems forced. “A-And you walked off with the guy willingly, okay? Like. Thought you and Dream were buddies ‘cause of that.” He sees Tommy flinch at that and quickly tries to change the subject. “Love the hair, by the way! It looks good on you!” Connor fidgets restlessly.

“The fuck are you on about?” Tommy is distracted from the terrible realization that someone had *seen him*. Someone could’ve saved him if he’d only cried out for help. More likely, Connor would’ve died and Tommy would’ve been responsible. There had never really ever been a way out. No escape that Tommy could have survived, not with Dream there, not ever. Not until now. He’s out. He needs to *believe* that he’s free. It’s like it won’t sink in.

“The... the hair looks good on you. Under the... blood, I guess,” Connor nods to him awkwardly. “I think I’m gonna go,” he sidesteps past Tubbo, pausing once more. “I really am sorry, man. I know I didn’t know you needed help, but... wish I had, I guess,” he shrugs, and before Tommy can reply, makes his way down the primepath aimlessly.

Tommy tries to pull down his hair so he can see what Connor was talking about. It’s thinned over the past months, and in the dark and under the dirt he can’t make out what Connor meant.

“What’s he mean about my hair?” Tommy looks to the rest of them.

“It looks... different. Looks bleached in the front or something. Did you— did you not know that, Tommy?” Tubbo offers him a hand off the ground.

Tommy accepts, leaning forward against him as the world spins. He steadies. Ranboo hands him the bloody green bandana which he had dropped in his panic. Tommy takes it back, holding onto it tightly. “No. I, er, I haven’t seen myself in... Fuck, I dunno how long. Not since... I mean I saw it in the water in the sink, but it was so dark, that was just like, my outline. Before that... At Logstedshire, maybe in the water there? I dunno.”

Phil and Techno exchange worried looks.

“I wanna... I wanna wash up. I’ll see myself then, eh?” Tommy pushes on into his home.

“Maybe you should get cleaned up first, Tommy. It might be kind of...” Ranboo trails off uncertainly, searching for the right word. “...jarring, to see yourself after so long.”

“Wot?” Tommy’s eyebrows furrow together, creasing the dried blood and dirt on his forehead.

“You look sort of rough, dude,” Techno laughs nervously.

Tommy looks at all of them, staring after him anxiously. He doesn’t know what he’s going to see that they’re so scared of. Tommy has seen his own broken bones, watched his finger get

cut off and has woken in a pool of his own blood. In all that time he has not seen his own face.

Tommy forces a laugh, broken and hoarse. “*Sort of rough.* You should’ve seen me before Dream killed me last time. He beat the hell out of me, it was all part of the *plan*, though. The plan to get you those coordinates.” They’re all just still staring at him. He’s going to keep talking until they stop. “Wilbur helped a lot. Some of it was his idea, see? I had to make sure he was brought back to life. So, when I got brought back, I wasn’t too hurt, y’know? I had to goad Dream. So he hurt me. Knocked me out. But that got Wil back,” Tommy nods. “A-And next time– Next time we get Dream, we’re gonna get Wil back, and he won’t even have to hurt me for it! ‘C-Cause we’re gonna *make* him, right? Right?”

A dreaded silence. No one speaks for a moment. Techno and Phil won’t stop exchanging those knowing looks. It’s infuriating.

Tubbo finally speaks. “You look tired, boss man. Once you’re better, we can talk through things. We won’t stop looking for him,” Tubbo forces a weak smile. Tubbo knows it’s useless, but he doesn’t know what else to say right now. *When you’re better.* Like Tommy has the flu and not... *this*. Tubbo can’t even describe what’s happened to his best friend. He had told himself he was prepared for the worst, but seeing him is something else entirely.

Tubbo won’t look him in the eye. Tommy notices. He hates it. No one looks at him the same anymore, he wishes that he and Tubbo could have stayed the same. Through all of this, everything had changed, he knows there’s no going back, but if he could save some part of himself, Tommy would’ve liked to save the part of him that belongs to Tubbo. Just not this. Not this *pity* and horror. He’s got this growing feeling of dread that no one is going to listen to him. They’ll all humor him because they think he’s one bit of bad news away from falling apart, but none of them will *listen*. Tommy has been through hell and come back still able to fight, and they really think telling him they think he’s wrong is what will break him?

Is it worse that part of Tommy is scared that they’re right?

“I’m gonna... I gotta get the blood off... can you stay?” Tommy still looks to Ranboo and Tubbo. Even if they pity him, even if they’re both still shocked and overwhelmed by the sight of him, at least they’re here. “Up here, obviously, but... don’t go anywhere, eh?”

“Right, Tommy, of course. Do you... Do you want help?” Tubbo hesitates.

Tommy laughs, hoarse and almost embarrassed. “I can fuckin’ wash up on my own, fucking hell, Tubso, how pathetic am I?”

“You’re not– You’re not *pathetic*, Tommy,” Tubbo stammers. “You’re– You’re...” Tubbo looks to Ranboo.

Ranboo stares between them, trying to think quickly. “Y’know, it’s okay to need help, Tommy.”

“I know! I don’t need help with this,” Tommy snaps, anger bleeding through. How is he supposed to accept his own freedom if no one thinks he’s capable of being a person on his

own? It *can't* be like Dream said. He can do things on his own. He has to. "Just— Just stay here." *Right. You're all independent now, huh, Tommy? Like you're not fucking terrified that you're gonna come back upstairs and see that they left you. Can't be alone, can you?*

"We'll be here, Tommy," Ranboo nods.

"Tommy, I'm sorry if I— I dunno. Just want you to know that—" Tubbo can't put together words. He doesn't know how to tell Tommy that everything he's done has been out of love, not obligation. Tommy has never been and never will be a burden to him. "We'll be here," is what he says instead. Maybe that's enough.

Tommy manages a smile. "I hope you two can survive two minutes without m-my presence." Tommy's old teasing bravado, the way he'd act out his pride just to make someone laugh and roll their eyes at him, it feels unnatural. It feels like something he's not allowed anymore. Tommy says something teasing and cocky, something that would've felt natural to him in a life long dead, and now he waits for retaliation.

Tommy hesitates once more at the top of the stairs. His home is unfamiliar. The thought of going underground again makes Tommy feel sick. He's going to walk down the stairs on his own. He can do this. Tommy has been alone for days at a time before now, locked in a cell underground, he can walk downstairs in his own fucking home and be alone.

He's home. That part hasn't sunk in yet. None of it has, really.

Tommy's footsteps echo against stone. His house was weaker in the past, dirt walls, crumbling and simple. Maybe this is stronger, but Tommy hears his footsteps echo and he can only think of Dream's vault. Tommy doesn't like how many shadows and corners there are down here. He lights another lantern, the room feels warmer, or maybe just less hidden. His house isn't a mess, any more than it normally would be with him at least, Connor kept the place together relatively well. Tommy goes to his sink. He hesitates, just to the side of it. If he steps closer, he'll be looking into a mirror.

Tommy steps forward and immediately looks away. One glimpse was enough. Tommy stares down at the sink, but even that he's forced to look at his bruised hands and thin arms. He looks back up.

The stranger looking back at him looks disgusted. Not that Tommy can blame him. It's like looking at a corpse. This person in the mirror is nothing. He's *nothing*. Just bones and hollowed out cheeks and dried blood hiding every bit of skin not yet bruised, there's a part of his ear missing, a little slice through it that he can't remember getting, and there's a scar, a rough shape no bigger than an emerald right in the middle of his throat. That he remembers. It's barely visible, a dark purple bruise covering most of his neck. His hair is thin and matted and there's the streak of white in it. Just like Wilbur, albeit not as much. His eyes are grey. Tommy leans in closer just to be sure because that *can't* be, it has to be a trick of the light, and that shows him cracked, dried lips and deep dark circles around *grey eyes*. Empty eyes. There's nothing there. Tommy tries to read that face for some sign of life beyond fear and there is just *nothing*.

He looks down again. His hands are clinging to the side of the sink like if he lets go he's going to disappear forever, knuckles white beneath the red as he holds on for dear life. He's not falling anymore. He doesn't feel real and it all hurts but he's *not falling*. This isn't limbo. He won't let it be. Tommy hates how much blood is still under his fingernails. He begins to scrub at them. He has soap here. The soap helps. He scrubs at his hands with a rag until they're red. Red, but clean. The blood is all washed out. Now he gets to see his bruised knuckles. He doesn't know how he got those bruises. He's tired of not knowing what's happened to him.

Tommy makes the mistake of looking up again and flinches, quickly turning away. His hands are clean. It's not enough. Yet again Tommy's clothes stick to his skin, stiff with dried gore, peeling them away definitely pulls at unhealthy and damaged skin. Tommy hasn't washed his hair in months. Tommy fills the bath. He goes to one of his chests and rummages.

He finds several musty, wrinkled variations of the same red and white shirt. He's almost scared to touch them. Tommy backs away from the chest, hands still fidgeting and trembly at his side. He returns to the bath and dunks his head in warm water, like he's still trying to wake up. It's quiet under the water, peaceful. Until he thinks of drowning. Tommy jolts back, shaking his hair out like a dog. The water is already clouded with the brownish red of dirt and dried blood. Tommy takes a bucket. This is something he can control. He will wash away all of this pain one step at a time. He'll be clean, and then he'll be better.

Some of Tommy's hair washes out with the blood. He wishes it were just the white hair. He keeps scrubbing at the blood until the water turns cold. There's no more blood left. He's cleaner than he's been in a year. It doesn't feel like enough. That vault, that cell, *Dream*, clings to him like a second skin, like the pins and needles of falling through limbo.

Tommy returns to his chest of clothes. The sight of a fucking *shirt* shouldn't hurt so much. Tommy digs deeper. A white shirt. The kind he would've worn under his L'Manberg uniform, but not the uniform itself. This he can manage. The green bandana is a soaking wet mess still covered in dark stains. He wrings it out. He puts it back on. That weight around his neck is a comfort, bloody or not.

He should go back upstairs now. His friends are waiting for him.

Instead Tommy picks a corner of the room. He sits back in it, knees tucked into his chest. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to stay here, either. He doesn't know what to do with himself, there are no orders to follow, no threats to avoid, there's not even the freedom that came with the helplessness of limbo. He *should* go upstairs.

Tommy wants Wilbur.

He's free— He's *finally* free. He gets to live. He's *home*. All Tommy can think about is he left his big brother behind. This time Wilbur didn't leave him, Wilbur stayed with him every second he could. *Tommy* left. Everything Wil did to get him out, to protect him, maybe that's something like atonement, maybe that should be enough, but it's *not*. Tommy doesn't fucking care about forgiving his brother, he just wants *him*. He just wants his brother, no more unfinished symphonies, no more games or war or only being able to hold each other when they're dead, he wants Wilbur to come home. He's home but that's not really true

because Tommy hasn't been home since it became a crater. After *everything* he went through, Tommy has gone through hell a hundred times over and *still* he persists, surviving by a fluke or a miracle or just because maybe he was loved enough, and none of it matters. Survival is not the reward, Dream has proved that over and over again, it's just the consequence. Tommy knows what he deserves now. After all of this, Tommy *deserves* to keep his brother.

## Chapter End Notes

this boy will be the death of me he makes my heart ache. I'M the one writing him how come I have to feel emotional about him too :(

The plot isn't over yet. Where's Dream, huh?? Where's *Wilbur*? Oooh questions remain! I don't think this will have an outcome any of you expect, but it's been planned since, well, *almost* the very beginning. We're not there yet. This is how I tend to do these sorts of tragedies, pain followed by something agonizingly, slowly, almost like progress ;)

(and a happy ending of COURSE)

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

Hi.

This is the part where this story branches off. Keep reading here for the happy, canonical ending.

If you would like to see an au with all the horror of tddd with none of the catharsis or relief, [this is where you can do that](#).

CW: Trouble eating, metaphorical animal death, paranoia. And referenced c!Dream content (? That's the only way I can think to put that lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy can't stay down here. Not because his friends are worried and waiting, nor because if he stays down here in the dark it will only prolong his misery, no— Tommy remembers something.

Tommy scans every corner, knowing even the one he has curled into isn't safe. Dream could be in the walls again. The longer he stares the more he becomes convinced of it. Stone walls don't mean anything. Dream could burrow in just as easily as if they were dirt. His home is messily constructed, there are too many half finished rooms and holes in the walls. Too many places someone could be watching him from. *He's in the walls. Why do you think you made it home, Tommy? Because he was waiting here. He's waiting for you to panic. It's more fun when you panic, remember?*

Tommy doesn't move. The room is silent except for his own breathing, growing faster and shakier by the second. He's breathing too loud. He can't tell if it's just him or if someone else is breathing just beyond the walls. Dream could open up the walls just behind him, Tommy would hear it, but by then it would be too late. He could grab him easily. That's too simple. Dream would've done it by now if he was directly behind him. Dream must be somewhere else. Around a corner— *why* are there so many corners?— or even under the floors. This room is too bright, it makes the shadows deeper outside of it. Tommy stares into the dark, he must be able to see if there's a white mask in those shadows, he'd have to. Maybe he should dim the lantern. He's grown used to the dark.

*That doesn't mean he isn't here. He's watching you. You know he is. The moment you try to leave, he's going to grab you. Maybe you'll get lucky and he'll just shoot you with a crossbow again and carry off your corpse. Maybe you won't get so lucky. He'll cover your mouth so you can't scream just like he did before. He could wrap around you and keep your arms pinned with just one arm you're so fucking thin now. And you're weak too. You won't be able to get him to let go, not even long enough to cry out for help. The moment you move he'll move too. Right now he's just staring at you. He can see how scared you are. He's*

*probably having fun. He knows you're not moving because the moment you do, he's going to hurt you. It's the worst fucking game of chicken. What're you gonna do, Tommy? You can't stay here forever. Maybe it won't be so bad once he takes you. He'll have to kill you eventually, and you'll get to see Wilbur.*

"Where's Wilbur?" Tommy whispers it shakily under his breath, knees tucked into his chest as he still watches the walls and waits. No one explained, really. If Wilbur was dead, or if Dream still had him alive somewhere. He should get answers. He hopes Wilbur is dead. Better dead than back with Dream.

That's a lie. He feels selfish for thinking it. He should want Wilbur dead, because while dead Dream can't torture him. But Tommy wants Wilbur alive. That's the truth of it, alive means Tommy has a chance of bringing him home. Maybe Tommy should just get up, get it over with. It seems more and more apparent that Dream is his only path to Wilbur, surely the smug bastard knows it, watching him spiral. Tommy has a fleeting moment of insanity where he wonders if Dream can hear his thoughts. No— No, he can't get irrational now, he's just watching. He's just watching through the walls. The waiting game is always the worst part. Maybe if he starts pleading now Dream will just kill him. Tommy feels a sob rising up again, he covers his mouth with his hand, hardly daring to breathe. Dream didn't like it when he cried. Except when he did. Probably right now he's getting a kick out of Tommy holding back sobs before Dream has even done anything to him yet.

Tommy cannot stay here. Dream will get bored, he'll finally come out and hurt him. Waiting is only putting off the inevitable. If he runs for the stairs, Dream won't let him get there. If Dream drags him back behind the walls, will he keep him there? Just until his friends get worried and come looking? Will Tommy have to hear Tubbo call his name one more time before Dream finally snaps his miserable neck?

Oh *fuck* he doesn't want to be alone, he doesn't want to be alone with Dream— he needs Wilbur, where's *Wilbur*—

~

*Callahan whispers to you: his body is upstairs in the community house. I wasn't sure where to put him.*

*You whisper to Callahan: thank you.*

"Callahan put— uh, he put Wil in the community house," Phil clears his throat. There have been enough tears shed today, by people far more deserving of them than him.

"Huh?" Techno blinks, looking away from the horizon. They stayed outside, standing watch while Tubbo and Ranboo looked after their friend.

"He didn't know where else to put him, which is fair, I'd expect. Not exactly a funeral home set up in L'Manberg."

Techno shakes his head, like he's trying to get water out of his. "Sorry, I just, wasn't payin' attention," he laughs awkwardly.



Phil stares at him for a moment, scrutinizing. “Stop overthinking it, mate. It’s just gonna drive you insane.”

“Overthinking *what*, Phil?” Techno grumbles.

Phil looks pointedly back at Tommy’s house, where Tubbo and Ranboo are talking in hushed tones inside. “How you’re doing fuckin’ backflips up there,” he pokes Techno’s temple, “to figure out how you could’ve saved him.”

Techno sighs irritably. “No, no I’m not. He was *dead*, I couldn’t save someone who was dead. I know that.”

Phil gives him one of those looks, where Phil understands too much and would help if he’d let him. “Yeah, you *know* that, but do you believe it?”

“That’s just semantics, Phil,” Techno tries to brush him off. Tommy is alive again and he’s so much worse than he was before. The Tommy Techno had seen die had had the strength to run to him, to scream his name, to crawl through the snow even while bleeding. The Tommy they just brought home wouldn’t have even made it out of the woods. Techno knows there’s nothing he could’ve done. Say he’d taken Tommy back to L’Manberg himself, that wouldn’t have stopped Dream from robbing his grave.

“He’s home now,” Phil nods resolutely. “There’s no reason to carry blame for something like this.”

Techno feels bitter irritation rise up against his bidding. “What, like you blame yourself for Wilbur?”

Phil tenses. His voice softer now. “That’s— That’s *different*, you know it’s different, Techno—”

“Maybe the first time, but what about *now*?” Techno cuts him off. “You carried out Wilbur’s body like— like he was *yours* to carry, right?”

Phil stares at him for a moment with wide eyes. “H-He’s my *son*—”

“Not like— you didn’t carry him like he was just your kid, Phil. You carried him like he was your... your *burden* or whatever. You weren’t the one that killed him this time,” Techno says firmly. “I won’t pretend that you killing him had nothing to do with all this, but we don’t know what would’ve happened. If Wilbur had lived, so. No point in carrying it around.”

Phil laughs, dry and humorless. “Oh, don’t get me started there, Techno. You’re right, we’re never gonna know what might’ve happened, but d’you really think Wil would’ve let Dream walk all over his country like that? Enough that giving up *Tommy* was the answer?”

“Oh my *god*, Phil, you’re not seriously blaming *yourself* for Tommy’s exile, are you?” Techno would roll his eyes if he weren’t mildly concerned.

“No— No, I’m *not*, but I’m just saying things would’ve been different—”

“I knew Wilbur too, I was there in Pogtopia, I saw all the stuff he never told you about in his letters. If he had survived– Which, honestly, even if you hadn’t killed him I think–” Techno stops himself. He knows his next words are cruel, but nonetheless the truth. “I think he would’ve found a way regardless. But let’s say he lived. Would L’Manberg have come back the same? Come back *at all*? And if it did, d’you really think another war with Dream was gonna fix anything? Because that’s the only difference. Tubbo, Wilbur, it doesn’t *matter*. War with Dream or exiling someone, their authority couldn’t make a good choice, because there wasn’t one. That’s part of the *problem* with authority...”

Phil is still caught up on that part in the middle. *He would’ve found a way regardless.*

“Let’s just agree to stop blaming ourselves, alright, Techno? Or at least lets pretend to for a while,” Phil sounds so weary.

Techno is quiet for a moment. He hates this part. “That was... That was unfair. I’m sorry, Phil.”

“S’alright, mate. I know you didn’t mean anything by it. Sorry if I pushed.”

Techno laughs. “We’re gettin’ old, Phil. Apologizing, arguing like an old married couple,” Techno glances over his shoulder to Tommy’s house. “Babysitting.”

“We were babysitting long before now, Techno,” Phil smiles. “Or, wasn’t babysitting for me, that’s just parenting.”

“I don’t know if it was babysitting for me either, Phil. *Babysitting* sorta implies I knew what I was doing.”

“You were great, Techno. Dunno what me and Wil would’ve done without you,” Phil nudges him.

Techno smiles, even as it hurts. He looked after Wilbur long before now, but all he can think about is Pogtopia. He got them food. He built railings. He taught them to fight better. But he didn’t save Wilbur. And sometimes Techno fears he ushered on the end rather than prevented it. Tommy was always the one talking about saving L’Manberg and Wilbur about destroying it. It was Techno’s fault for never realizing they were talking about Wilbur as much as L’Manberg.

~

Tubbo hates that he feels some tension leave his shoulders when Tommy leaves the room. It’s just that when Tommy was in the room, Tubbo was just waiting for him to keel over. It’s not that he’s any less worried now, but instead of watching him, he can only wait.

“He’s still limping. Did you see that?” Ranboo points out, speaking softly, not quite a whisper, but he doesn’t really want Tommy hearing them talk about him either.

“Yeah. He needs another health pot, you saw those bruises. They should’ve gone by now,” Tubbo agrees. With Tommy no longer here, it gets harder to set aside his rage. “How *sick* is

he that a health potion isn't enough to take care of some *bruises*?"

"Well, he's obviously been starved. That can't be helping," Ranboo murmurs, staring at the ground.

"No, I'd expect it can't," Tubbo's looks like he wants to break something.

"Well, he's back now. He's— He's safe," Ranboo fumbles for a reply.

Tubbo loses some of that anger, it dying too easily. Tommy is back, but Tubbo doesn't know if he's safe. There's too much about Tommy he doesn't know anymore. "Oh my *god*." He covers his mouth with one hand, trying to keep it together. "Did you— Holy shit, did you see the way he reacted to *grass*?" Tubbo looks to Ranboo almost pleadingly. He doesn't know how much longer he can carry on like this. Actually, he does know how long. As long as Tommy needs him.

Ranboo nods and he looks as heartbroken as Tubbo feels.

"When he... When he wanted to be put down, when I was carrying him, he didn't quite *ask*, but it was like... it was still like he was asking for permission," Ranboo says it quietly. "And he was so light, Tubbo. Like. I didn't realize a person could weigh that little. I could feel his bones. His breathing was... it was kind of rattled. Even when he fell asleep, it was like it was hard to breathe."

Tubbo sits back on a chest, burying his head in his hands for a moment, taking a deep breath. "Oh god, Ranboo, how the hell are we expected to help him? He's— He's *sick*. Physically and otherwise."

Ranboo shrugs helplessly. "Well, for the physically sick part, we'll do what we can. I don't know about using a bunch of health potions when he's already weak, that could do more harm than good."

"I think I'm gonna reach out to Ponk. Ask them to come take a look at him. They were Schlatt's doctor before the war," Tubbo resolves, looking up. He cringes. He doesn't like the way he said that, like he's making a decision *for* Tommy. "I'll ask Tommy if he'd like to see them," he repeats more firmly.

"*Wil! Wil, h-help me!*" Tommy's panicked, tearful voice echoes up the stairs. "*Tubbo, Ranboo, fucking someone!*"

There's a split second where Ranboo and Tubbo lock eyes, Ranboo doesn't look away, instead he only has a moment to process that Tubbo isn't unbreakable right now, and he's just as scared as Ranboo feels. The moment passes, Tubbo all but throws himself down the stairs, heart pounding in his throat and axe at the ready. He looks for an enemy first. The room is empty, save for Tommy ducked down in the corner, head bowed, tugging at his hair. Tubbo can see him trembling from here. Ranboo is right behind him, Tubbo can hear Phil and Techno thundering down the stairs as well. Tommy hasn't moved.

“Tommy, Tommy we’re here— It’s okay, what happened?” Tubbo still keeps one hand on the axe but he kneels down beside Tommy and puts a hand on his shoulder, pulling back when Tommy flinches and cries out at the contact, jolting back against the wall, sitting up and staring at all of them, like he’s expecting a different face, or mask, rather. Tubbo glances back over his shoulder, relieved to see Techno and Phil fanning out to check the rest of the basement.

Tubbo is forced to turn back to Tommy by a panicked, clumsy hand grabbing onto his shirt.

“*He’s here, Tubbo,*” Tommy isn’t shouting anymore, instead, words whispered like he’s saying something forbidden. Tommy looks better without the blood, but now there’s nothing to hide the more permanent damage, the sallow cheekbones, the bruises across his jaw and around his neck. It’s a strange paradox for Tommy to look less beaten down and somehow more dead all at once. Tommy isn’t looking at him, he’s staring around the room, searching, something wild behind his eyes, like a rabbit in a headlight.

Tubbo takes Tommy’s hand away from his shirt, giving it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. “Where, Tommy?”

“H-He’s in the walls again... H-He’s *here,*” Tommy whispers frantically, holding onto his hand so tightly it almost hurts. “T-That’s why he let me go, Tubbo, that’s why he let me go—he’s waiting *here.*”

Tubbo feels dread like a cold weight in his stomach. His mouth has gone very dry. He remembers Dream in the walls. It feels far more horrifying knowing what he now knows compared to the first war. Tubbo scans the walls with as much care as Tommy had, albeit a bit more lucid.

“We’re going to get him, Tommy,” Tubbo puts an arm around Tommy slowly, ready to pull back if he flinched, but Tommy lets him help him stand. “Ranboo—” Tubbo turns back to his minutes man almost urgently. “Ranboo, Phil, can you both wait with Tommy outside, please? And stay sharp,” Tubbo pulls away, but Tommy is still holding onto his hand so tightly. “I’ll be alright, Techno is gonna help me down here. Can you let go, Tommy, please? So I can do this.”

Tommy lets go immediately with a shaky nod, he keeps looking at the floor now, like he’s afraid if he looks up he’ll finally see Dream waiting.

“Tubbo...” Ranboo isn’t sure what to say, he hadn’t heard Tommy’s words, but he can see the grave fear in Tubbo’s eyes.

“Me and Techno are gonna search properly. Techno, you have a pickaxe, I assume?” Tubbo turns to him.

“Uhhh, yeah, why?” Techno returns from around the corner, nothing found in the unfinished rooms.

“We’re searching in the walls.”

Techno laughs gruffly. “We’re *what?*”

“Seeing as he’s done it before, yeah. We’re searching the walls,” Tubbo trades an axe for a pick.

“He’s *what?*” Ranboo’s eyes widen.

“I’ll explain *later*, can you and Phil wait outside with Tommy, please?” Tubbo can do this. He’s good at following through on a plan.

“He p-probably isn’t here anymore,” Tommy says, eyeing the walls warily again. “I knew— I thought he was gonna try and grab me if I m-moved so I... I couldn’t move, I *couldn’t*, so I— I screamed instead.”

No one acknowledges that Tommy had first cried out for Wilbur.

“I’m glad you did, Tommy,” Tubbo is quick to reassure him, trying to make himself seem calm and certain. Tommy isn’t in his red and white shirt, he’s in an old white button up, the buttons one row off and the sleeves half pushed up. Tubbo wore the same during his presidency. “And you’re probably right, but just to see. We’ll put the room back together after.”

“D-Don’t care,” Tommy shrugs, grabbing onto Ranboo’s arm as he sways on his feet unsteadily. “I can’t— I can’t *stay* here anymore, not knowing he could... He...” Tommy shudders. “I wanna go outside, can I go outside now?” He looks to Ranboo.

“Yeah, of course, Tommy,” Ranboo gives Tubbo one last disconcerted glance before ascending the stairs, Phil close behind.

Tommy lets out a sigh of relief once he can see the sky again. He can see stars. Tommy had missed the stars. He sits beside his garden, digging into the dirt immediately, like an instinct to make up for what had been lost.

“Oh, man, you’re probably hungry,” Ranboo stops before joining him. “I’ll be right back, one— one sec, Phil, can you—?”

“I’m not going anywhere, mate.”

“Good.”

Ranboo leaves and Tommy looks back to Phil with something like panic. He opens his mouth to say something, before pausing, quickly looking away.

“You alright?” Phil raises an eyebrow. He doesn’t see why Tommy would be any more afraid of him than anyone else. He takes a small step back, puts some distance between them, just in case. “Well, ‘course you’re not, but, you know—”

“Where’s Wilbur?”

Phil feels like he just got hit by an explosion, a shock wave ramming into his chest, taking the air from his lungs. He'd know. He remembers the disorientated panic of Wilbur's symphony. "H-He's— He's at the community house."

Tommy seems to process this slowly. They know where he is. Tommy isn't surprised, exactly, maybe a little disappointed. "So that means he's dead, then?"

"I—" Phil is at a loss, utterly thrown off. He feels like he's the wrong person to be explaining this, but that's not really true, is it? "Y-Yes. He's— I'm sorry, Tommy, but yes. He's dead."

Tommy nods, still looking lost in thought. He doesn't look *sad* exactly, nor surprised nor hopeless, mostly just a grim sort of understanding. "Dream told me he had him. That he had him alive somewhere. Said he'd hurt him. Or, hurt him more, I guess."

"Oh," Phil fumbles for the right words, or any words for that matter. "We— We found him back at that creepy hall. He was... He was dead when we got there."

Another nod, Tommy's pale eyes solemn and calm. "How?"

"I dunno if you want to hear that, mate—"

"*How?*" Tommy asks more forcefully. It's the most conviction Phil has seen from him since he brought down the axe on Dream.

"He—" Phil is having a hard time saying it. "It was, ah, well," Phil mimes a cut across his own throat. "Bled out, I think."

Tommy gives another nod. "Good."

Phil didn't think he could be any more stunned by this kid. "*Good?* What'd you mean, *good?*" He sputters.

Tommy looks more surprised by his response. "I, well, I guess I thought Techno would've told you."

"Told me..?!" Phil is growing more baffled by the second.

"He saw me bleed out, from a wound here," Tommy grabs his own bruised throat, wincing. He stares out at the ravine underneath the bridge to L'Manberg. It's mostly shadow now, but nothing like the darkness of limbo. "It's a pretty quick way to go. Well, quicker than bleeding out in other ways, I guess."

"Oh. Got it," Phil considers himself to be well acquainted with death, but his Death is different to the one Tommy had played host to all these months. It unnerves him more than a little, the wrongness of it all. Tommy's reality is in direct opposition to Philza's existence on one life, a finality Phil had made peace with, and which Tommy had been forced to defy over and over again.

Tommy looks back up to him again. "D'you wanna know what he died for?" Tommy says it with far too much calm. It might be the calmest Phil has seen him since he returned.

Phil is inexplicably reminded of Ghostbur. It's not too far off. Tommy looks half dead, even now once cleaned of blood, he seems a ghost in his own right. "Go on, then," Phil says hoarsely. He doesn't know if he wants an answer.

Tommy holds up his left hand, the palm facing Phil. His right hand taps on the part of his left palm, just below his thumb. "*That.*"

"The fuck do you mean?" There's no anger in Phil's tone, something more like panic. He keeps staring at Tommy's hand in fixated horror.

"Oh, y'know how it is. Dream was gonna, y'know," Tommy copies Phil and mimes slicing off his own thumb. "And Wil was all heroic n' shit and stopped him." A painful pause, Phil at a loss for words. "I'm not trying to make light of it," Tommy says quickly. "Or act like I'm not grateful or some shit, but that's the truth of it. Wilbur died— Or, that *time* he died, he died for my left thumb." Tommy actually *laughs*, hoarse and more than a little frantic. Phil doesn't mistake it for malice, but he's disconcerted all the same. Phil in all of his years can't think of a time where someone has been this terrifying to him while also not being a threat. Tommy laughs, but his eyes remain pale and empty. "That's fucked, isn't it?"

"Yeah," is all Phil can manage. He wants to know more. He wants to hear about Wil in his last months alive and dead. Before he can fathom up the courage to ask, Ranboo returns.

"It's, uh, it's not much, but I thought... thought it might be good," Ranboo interrupts. He'd tried to announce himself before coming up behind Tommy, but Tommy flinches either way. Always like he's expecting a blow.

"Fucking christ, Ranboo, you can't sneak up on a man like that," Tommy clutches his chest, his heart racing in an instant.

"Sorry," Ranboo hesitates now.

"Well, come on then, you're not gonna scare me by stepping closer *now*," Tommy motions him closer. "And— Phil, you know, sorry if I... freaked you out, or whatever. I wouldn't worry about it too much." Tommy sees Phil's persisting confusion. "Because we're gonna get him back. Trust me. Dream is still out there, and therefore so is Wilbur. Like, not *literally*, of course, but y'know. *Accessible*, basically."

"What're we... what're we talking about?" Ranboo's voice is a little higher now.

"Oh. You know. My dead brother, *his* dead son," Tommy nods knowingly.

"...Right," Ranboo is quick to move on. "There wasn't much to choose from. I think Connor had been living off of just carrots."

"Carrots!" Tommy's immediate delight is almost as disconcerting as when he's terrified by something. "Aw, man, I love carrots! Haven't seen these... Fuck if I know how long. I'm more thirsty than anything, can I have water?"

There it is again. Not quite a request, instead asking for *permission*.

“Yeah...” Ranboo voice comes out too soft and he’s looking at Tommy’s face, not right in the eyes of course, but it’s like he wants to say something more. “I’ll... One sec, I’ll–”

“I got it, mate,” Phil quickly stands. He has been adamant about not drawing attention to everything different about Tommy now, he deserves more peace than that, but Phil can’t deny there’s something unsettling here. He’s going to get him water, and he will stay. He won’t be freaked out by kid who needs his help.

“Thank you,” Tommy accepts the water too gratefully. Like he’d expected them to say no. There was a time where Tommy using manners would be a pleasant surprise, now it’s just unsettling. Tommy stares at the corked bottle with something almost like irritation or disappointment.

“Something wrong?” Phil asks.

“W-What? No,” Tommy grows defensive, like he was caught doing something he shouldn’t. Everything about him is so jumpy and strange. Tommy with something like grim determination, uncorks the stopper, splashing some of the water on his hand. Tommy seems pleasantly surprised. Ranboo and Phil exchange a disconcerted look. Tommy drinks slowly, carefully, watching Ranboo and Phil out of the corner of his eye the whole time, like he’s half expecting them to take it away.

Tubbo makes another hole in the wall. He’s getting sweaty now, but he persists, the dust in the air makes him almost lightheaded. He always got a little out of it if he spent too long in the mines, this isn’t all that different, but he keeps going anyway. Just to be sure there isn’t a tunnel waiting just behind the next block.

Techno helps, albeit less enthusiastically, alongside him. “So, uh. What’s all this about Dream bein’ in the walls?”

Tubbo glances to him before letting loose another swing. Still nothing. “Happened before. Way back in the disc war. He was trying to find out where Tommy was hiding the discs.”

“Huh. So, Dream and Tommy have... been like this for a while.”

Tubbo stops his work, turning to Techno with a cold stare. “Dream and Tommy have been like *what* for a while?”

Techno raises his hands passively. “Just meant their, uhhh.” Techno fumbles for the right words, unsure if what he comes up with is the right choice or not, “...cat and mouse type deal, I guess.”

Tubbo scoffs, bitter anger still lingering in his chest. “Yeah. Yeah, you could say that,” another furious swing of the pick, and still nothing revealed. “I’d hardly call it a *cat and mouse type deal* anymore,” there’s an edge to his voice. He continues to break into the walls. Still nothing.

“What’d you call it then?”



“Well, you heard what Dream wrote,” another swing. “I’d reckon it’s more like if Dream had a pet snake,” another swing, “and a pet hamster,” another, “and he kept feeding the hamster to the snake,” another, “over,” another, “and over,” another, “and over again,” Tubbo swings so forcefully he stumbles forward. His hands are growing shaky now, breathing hard. Tubbo has all of this anger remaining and nowhere to put it.

Techno stares after him, understanding, if not disturbed. “...Yeah. That, uh, that makes perfect sense. Anyways— I don’t think we’re gonna find anything here, man. I mean, look, we’ve torn the place apart, alright? And, I’m gonna be honest,” Techno cringes on his own behalf. He knows this won’t go over well. “I don’t think Dream was ever really *here*.”

Tubbo freezes.

“Knew that you’d hate me sayin’ that— Would it help if I told you I do think Dream is probably out there somewhere? Probably not? Yeah, didn’t think so,” Techno tries to fill up the silence, fiddling with his pickaxe.

“Actually, Technoblade. I think—” Tubbo sighs, still scanning the walls, wishing for some sign that Dream had been here, however terrible that would be. “I think you might be right, and that scares me.”

“It... it does?”

“I want to believe him, Techno,” Tubbo is being honest in a way that catches Techno off guard. “I really, really do, because I don’t want him to think— I don’t want us to— We can’t treat him like he’s not in control.”

“But... if we both know he wasn’t really *here*, how’re we supposed to do that?”

“Well, not by lying to him, for starters,” Tubbo says firmly. “I’ll... I’ll figure it out. Let’s just get out of here.”

Tommy hasn’t eaten anything in he *thinks* four days. The carrots are too sweet. Tommy takes one bite; first off, it is much harder to bite into than watery mushroom soup— or bread if he’d been especially good that day— but most of all it’s too *sweet*. Tommy hadn’t had anything with that much sugar in a *long* time.

“They’re too sweet. Hurts my teeth,” Tommy frowns, looking down at the food and his garden just beyond. Everything is wrong now, nothing left untouched. “I liked carrots...”

“They’re *sweet*?” Ranboo asks somewhat incredulously. “They’re... they’re *carrots*,” a nervous, unsure sort of laugh.

Tommy shrugs, without answers. “It’s hard to eat anyway.”

“Well you gotta eat something, man. I can get you something else! Whatever you want,” Ranboo nods earnestly.

He’s met only with a shrug.

“I mean, hey, you look better, Tommy. That’s something, but you should still eat something,” Ranboo pushes gently.

“Right, *better*. Already knew I was gonna look like a corpse, I feel like one, eh?” Tommy laughs roughly. Ranboo doesn’t know what to say to that.

Tommy looks up the moment he hears someone coming, not a word spoken, but he stares after Tubbo, anxious for answers.

Tubbo hesitates and Tommy feels a different sort of dread. “Did you actually see him, Tommy?”

Tommy feels immediate panic, looking around at all of their expressions, all caring and worried, but there’s also doubt. He thinks it’s doubt, anyway. He hasn’t had to read anyone’s face in a long time, but he’s learned body language very well. Mostly he looked for anger, but no one here is angry with him. Tommy doesn’t know why he feels cornered all the same. “N-No. But– He– I just thought he has to be. How else would I be here? He never would’ve left me behind, Tubbo, he’d never let me go.”

Tubbo is understanding, there’s no judgement there, but Tommy knows what he’s going to say. “Okay, Tommy. I know. I’m– I’m still glad we checked. We don’t know where he is.”

“W-Was there a tunnel? Or…” Tommy doesn’t know why he’s *hoping* for confirmation of something so horrible.

“Not that we found, Tommy.” Tubbo is trying not to think of how disturbing those words are, Tommy’s utter certainty, *he’d never let me go*.

Tommy nods, staring at the ground, not really seeing it. “He’s… He’s got to be somewhere, why is he waiting– why doesn’t he j-just fucking get it over with–”

“We’re not letting him take you, Tommy,” Tubbo says with perhaps a bit too much force from the way Tommy flinches. “Sorry– I just–” Tubbo takes a deep breath, trying to lose some of that anger. “He is never coming near you again, alright? No matter how long it takes for us to find him.”

“I r-really thought he was there, Tubbo,” Tommy says shakily. “He said he’d always find me, and I was in my own fucking house, why wouldn’t he be waiting there?”

“I don’t know, Tommy. But you can stay somewhere else, if you want. I’ve got somewhere further away, somewhere safe,” Tubbo offers.

Tommy frowns. “What about L’Manberg?”

Tubbo looks at him with a bitter sort of smile that makes Tommy’s chest ache. “Wasn’t really the same without you there, bossman. It just wasn’t… It ended up just being *me*. Not entirely, but of the original of us… After Fundy left, and…”

“Fundy left?”

“Yeah, yeah he’s off in the desert somewhere, I think.”

“So... what about L’Manberg?” Tommy repeats himself, looking at all of them with grave seriousness, just as much as when they had been discussing Dream or Wilbur. Technoblade again thinks of Wilbur and Tommy’s ongoing warring philosophies, Wilbur seeking to destroy it, and Tommy’s resolution for L’Manberg, *No. Completely saved*. Tommy wants Wilbur back, it makes too much sense he latches on to L’Manberg as well.

“Well... Phil and I still live there, and Tubbo does too, really, he just also has another house...” Ranboo looks back to Phil and Tubbo uncertainly.

“W-What about Niki– Niki’s bakery?” Tommy sounds desperate.

“It’s still there, but she’s... she’s not around much,” Phil says apologetically.

“Oh,” Tommy tries not to let this panic him. Too much has changed. He can’t lose L’Manberg again. Tommy closes his eyes for a moment, his head hurts. “What about... what about Dream’s stuff?”

“His stuff..?” Techno asks. None of them are following Tommy’s choice in tangent.

“Yeah, his stuff, was there a book? The revive book– If he had a copy on him, that fixes– that fixes *everything*. Eh?” Tommy sets aside the issue of L’Manberg and returns to one parallel to it: Wilbur.

“No, Tommy. Not a new book, at least,” Tubbo says. “We could talk about this tomorrow. You’re still not your best. Did you eat something?”

“Okay, well, he must have copies hidden somewhere. He would, wouldn’t he? So, no new book, so–” Tommy’s eyes light up with an unnerving drive. “His journal, do we have that?”

“Yes,” Tubbo is tense immediately. “We do. We can destroy it, alright? We’ll– We’ll destroy all of it–”

“No, no don’t do that,” Tommy says sharply before flinching, tone much more docile now, “s-sorry, I meant, please don’t. I– I need it.”

“You *need* it?” Techno asks doubtfully.

“Yeah, yeah, if anything’s gonna tell me where he might be or-or how we’re gonna get Wil back, that’s what we’ve got, right?” Tommy looks to all of them, desperate for someone to understand.

Tubbo hates this. He hates the way Tommy makes himself smaller, changes his tone, like he’s scared of them. Then the desperation as he reaches for anything to hold onto and all he finds is that vile book. If he could, Tubbo would burn that book alongside Dream’s corpse. “Well, if anyone’s got a right to it, it’s you.” He doesn’t want Tommy to see that, but he knows that’s a worthless sentiment, Tommy *lived* it. “Look, Tommy, I think we’re all tired. So, we should– We should get you something to eat, and we can go back to mine. It’s in the

middle of nowhere, I don't think Dream would even know where it is. I deliberately made sure there weren't any Nether portals set up out there, and I'll keep guard."

"We can take shifts," Techno pitches in.

"Right," Tubbo agrees before looking back to Tommy for approval.

"But tomorrow, I need that book. Please. Until Dream comes for me, I want to try to get to Wilbur," Tommy gives in perhaps too easily, he says *until Dream comes for me* like it's inevitable.

"Okay, Tommy. It's yours," Tubbo says.

Tommy gives Tubbo a curious look, mouthing the words under his breath, *it's yours*. Nothing had belonged to him in a long time. Not even himself.

"Could I... I was thinking of having Ponk come 'round tomorrow as well. They could help. Make sure nothing's broken, stuff health potions can't fix," Tubbo offers.

Tommy nods. "Okay."

"Do you want to have some food before we head out? It's a bit far off the beaten track, but we can carry you again. And we'll get you shoes from your house before we go."

Tommy seems surprised again. "Shoes-? Oh, oh yeah, right." He'd forgotten about that.

"Yeah, so, did you want to go, or eat first?" Tubbo asks again.

That same bewildered look from Tommy. "...yes," he says it carefully, like it's a test.

Tubbo laughs. "Yes to which thing, bossman?"

Tommy stares at all of them, something guarded and unreadable behind his eyes, like he's trying to puzzle something out. Tommy won't admit it, but being given choices is sort of freaking him out. Everything was telling him there was a right and a wrong answer. Wrong answers had consequences. He thinks it over carefully. The smart thing is to always eat when food is available.

"Guess I'll have food then," Tommy mutters. "If that's okay."

"Yeah! Yeah, what're you thinking?" Ranboo is almost too enthused. "I'll get you whatever you want, man. I don't care if I have to track Niki down and get her in the bakery, I'll do it."

"Gettin' sorta clingy there, aren't you, Ranboo?" Tommy manages a smirk.

"Hey, come on, I'm just- Let me be nice," Ranboo laughs softly. He'd missed Tommy's teasing.

Tommy takes a moment to think. The past twelve hours had been *so* overwhelming. He can't take much more of this. "Just... Just get mushroom soup," he mutters gloomily.

“Mushroom soup, got it, can do!” Ranboo gets to his feet with a clap. “I’ll be back soon.”

“And I can grab you shoes, mate, one second,” Phil follows him.

“Could you get a coat, too?” Tubbo calls back to Phil before returning to Tommy. “It’s in a snow biome. It’s pretty, though.”

“And, why’d you move to the middle of fucking nowhere?” Tommy asks. He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t know if it feels like they all moved on without him or not, maybe if he’d come back and everything had been the same that would’ve hurt worse, his absence unfelt.

“It’s hard to relax, when New L’Manberg just feels like... well, like some obligation waiting to happen. I still spend most days there. Ranboo and I built an apiary, for the bees,” Tubbo wrings his hands in his lap. Tommy notices. Tubbo isn’t supposed to be *nervous* around him, then again, Tommy isn’t supposed to be nervous around Tubbo either. “I needed a project, bossman. I couldn’t just— I needed something to do, after you... after we thought you...”

It’s strange. It’s not just that they thought Tommy had died, he *had*, and yet here he is, despite all accounts and appearances, alive. “Right. Well, if I was in a house on stilts that might help. Isn’t any way for Dream to get in the walls then...”

“Dream knows where that is, though. No one knows where my place is. I was hoping to keep it that way, as much as possible, at least. Right now it’s just one cabin, but I’ve been wanting to make more. You could get your own place, if you want.”

Tommy wants to say *I’d rather stay with you*, but it feels like one more thing he’s not entitled to, so he just shrugs.

“Right, sorry, we’re asking you a lot of questions I’m sure you don’t want to answer,” Tubbo sighs.

Phil returns with a pair of beat up trainers and socks. “All I could find.”

“Yeah, yeah I was wearing my better shoes, day I was exiled, which, to be fair wasn’t saying much. This is fine, Phil.” Tommy hasn’t worn shoes in months. It’s such a small thing, one Tommy could’ve brushed past alongside a hundred other things he hasn’t done in months, but his hands shake, they shake constantly now, and when he goes to tie the laces, he keeps fumbling and dropping them, slipping from his hands. Out of the corner of his eye Tommy sees Tubbo lean forward.

“I could—”

“Don’t you *fucking dare*, Tubbo,” Tommy snarls. There’s genuine anger there. It isn’t meant for Tubbo, or at least it shouldn’t be, but in that split second Tommy is *furious* with him, it fades just as quickly, but not all of it. This frustration clings to him like a chain around his wrist. “Were you *really* about to fucking *tie my shoelaces*? That’s— That’s *worse* than patronizing. Do you all think I’ve turned into a *fucking child*? I see it, you know. I see *all* of

you fucking looking at me like I'm— like I'm fucked in the head or something!" Tommy's voice grows cracked and hoarse.

"Tommy—"

"N-No, shut up!" Tommy shouts it covering his ears. "I-I don't wanna *hear* this, alright?! You all treating me like I'm fuckin' delicate! Like I'm Dream's fucking glass doll and you think you'll b-break me! Well it's too fucking late! Years or months too late, see, I don't *fucking know*." Tommy hasn't shouted at anyone in a long time. All this anger at the unfairness of it all. He destroyed Dream with everything he had and it *hurts* to know that isn't enough. He could destroy Dream over and over again and it wouldn't bring back what he's lost. Tommy stands up sharply, laces still untied. Immediately his vision is spotted with white and he's overcome by dizziness. He doesn't even have the strength to storm off properly. Before he can even take a step, he falls back, landing in the muddied water between rows of plants in his overgrown garden.

Tommy doesn't say anything, frozen, Tubbo had jumped to his feet, now staring down at him, stricken and guilty and utterly unsure of what to do, Phil had been pacing the lawn, utterly focused on standing guard like he couldn't hear Tommy's shouting out of sheer awkwardness. Techno must be rubbing off on him. He glances back when Tommy falls silent, but all he could say would be some approximation of pity, so he resumes scanning the horizon. Tommy takes a shaky breath, eyes closed for a moment as he seems to piece something together in his head. "D'you mind?" He asks quietly, reaching a hand out to Tubbo.

Tubbo grabs his hand to help him to his feet.

Tommy grabs back. With one tug, Tubbo falls into the mud beside him. Tubbo gasps, the water colder than the air as he struggles to sit back up. Tommy starts cackling beside him.

"I got you, bitch!" Tommy sits back in the mud, pointing at Tubbo, struggling to speak around that wheezing, barking laugh Tubbo had been sure he would never hear again.

"You dickhead!" Tubbo splashes muddy water his way.

"Aw, what, you didn't miss this, Tubso?" Tommy grins cheekily.

"Well, yeah, I did!" Tubbo says it like it's the simplest thing in the world. Those rare moments where Tubbo so easily says something open and vulnerable with that matter-of-fact way of his.

Tommy's laughter fades, a softer smile taking its place as he looks over at his best friend. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Tubbo stares back, earnest and unwavering. Tubbo is looking him in the eye again. There's no pity there anymore, just that old look Tommy knows as well as his own face, Tubbo looking at him like he'd follow him anywhere.

Tommy nods. There's a warmth in his chest he almost finds unrecognizable. It takes him a moment to recognize it for what it is, it's contentment. "Missed you too, Tubs."

## Chapter End Notes

We're reaching what I consider the best part of harrowingly sad fics, the recovery. There probably won't be much intense action for the rest of the fic, not to say things are going to get *easy* any time soon, but know that the rest of the journey probably won't match the horror this fic has featured so far. Obviously, the Dream situation has to be solved, but yeah.

Still, there's more to come and things to fix. I hope you like the ride <3

And as always, I can be found at my tumblr, [peninkwrites](https://www.tumblr.com/peninkwrites), feel free to send me thoughts and whatever else there :D

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

TW: trouble eating, descriptions of injuries/scars, mild ableism (Tommy is scared of being weak, he'll outgrow it)

(also I half-assed the editing on this one. it is very late and I wanted to get it posted. forgive any mistakes)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy can't eat. Ranboo returns triumphant with mushroom soup, Tommy takes the bowl like he just handed him a bug and asked him to swallow it. Actually, knowing Tommy, *more* reluctant than if he had handed him a bug and asked him to swallow it.

"You... you don't like it," Ranboo's disappointment shows on his face. "I'm sorry, Tommy, I thought— I thought that's what you asked for, did you... did you ask for something else?" Ranboo asks worriedly, looking to Tubbo for confirmation.

"You're good, you didn't forget, bossman," Tubbo reassures him so naturally. Tommy can see the history in that, that he's done this before. Tommy does his best not to resent that. He feels like he's fallen out of time, grieving or not the world has moved on without him in too many ways.

Tommy stares down at the bowl in front of him and tries to convince himself he doesn't hate it. He doesn't think he can eat anything else. Tommy barely tastes it before he pukes into the grass.

"Fuckin' carrots..." Tommy mutters. "Can't... I can't eat. I just wanna leave now, can we just leave?"

Tubbo and Ranboo share a concerned look. Tommy watches them bitterly. He knows they don't understand and he can't blame them for not understanding, but how could Tommy explain? Sure, in this singular circumstance, he could explain that watered down soup was all he had eaten for months, that he doesn't know how to deal with it not being watered down, ignoring the fact that it tastes like nothing to him now, *nothing* being an improvement, as since Mushroom Henry it could only disgust him.

Sure, he could explain all that. He doesn't know how to explain everything else. The fact of it is, explaining every scar and every reason he's terrified won't stop those looks they keep giving. Tommy doesn't want to tell them that he's scared he'll be like this forever.

Tommy bunches up the laces of his shoes and tucks them in. He'll hopefully be steady enough to actually tie them before he has to run again, but as long as Tubbo, Ranboo,



Techno, and Phil are here, he'll make the journey on foot. They head back down the prime path, past the bench. Tommy and Tubbo don't share a look, but a feeling between them. Tommy is home but they're not in a situation where they can sit together and rest easily. It's late. Tommy is lucky to be alive. But the bench is still there, and maybe in the morning they can pretend things are like they used to be.

"How do you feel, Tommy?" Phil stops him for a moment.

Tommy looks at him incredulously. "Uh. Like shit, funny enough."

"Sorry, I meant more like— is there anything hurting you right now? Like, does anything feel broken? Head feel fuzzy at all?" Phil asks.

Tommy does a quick inventory. "I think it's just the usual."

*Just the usual.*

More than a little concerning.

"I'm still gonna ask Ponk to come tomorrow, if that's okay," Tubbo says.

Tommy hums an affirmative reply. "Wait, can we stop?" Tommy pauses. He's walking and that's progress, but he keeps a hand on Tubbo's shoulder to stay standing.

"What is it, bossman?"

Tommy nods down the hill. "I wanna see it." They follow his gaze. Tommy had spotted his grave.

They walk down there together— because what were they meant to do, tell him *no*? His own grave is kinder than what he's seen and experienced in the past months.

"Oh, yeah, thanks for putting flowers on my grave, Tubbo," Tommy pats his best friend on the arm, staring at the gravestone.

"Don't mention it," Tubbo isn't sure what to say to that, knowing what he knows, that Tommy saw those flowers because of Dream. Actually, he does know what to say. He has to ask. "How did... how'd you know it was me?"

"Wot?" Tommy blinks, not all there. "Oh, yeah, Dream..." Tommy frowns. The memory is especially hazy. Tommy assumes he died soon after he found out. Tommy doesn't know if it's a blessing or a curse that memories of his deaths and the violence prior is so often hazy. It also scares him that he has these blurred out hours of time lost to him. He'd still experienced that pain, he doesn't even have the luxury of knowing what it was. He's tired of missing pieces of himself. "I dunno how I know it. It was a long time ago. I just remember..." Tommy takes a deep breath. He can mourn himself later. "It's how I found out I had a grave."

"Oh," Tubbo wants to ask more. It's been months, sure, but the way Tommy says *a long time ago*, there's weight to it. He wants to ask so many things. *How many times did he kill you?*

*Did you see Wilbur? What did Dream do to you when you were alive? How long has it been since you've been outside? Before he took you away from Logstedshire, did you ever think of asking me for help?* Tubbo says nothing. Just waits as Tommy reads his own epitaph.

*Here lies Tommyinnit*

*Soldier, brother, friend.*

*You can let go now.*

Tubbo watches Tommy's expression as he reads, searching for some response. There's only quiet for a time. Tommy snuffles, wiping his eyes quickly.

Tommy laughs hoarsely. "I-I didn't need to let go, *you're* the clingy one." Even as he says this, he gives Tubbo's shoulder a gentle squeeze, he's still holding on. "Well, that's enough of that. Glad you didn't give me some fucking... tory lookin' statue."

Tubbo laughs. "Yeah, like that'd ever happen."

Another pause, Tommy not yet moving on from his grave. "What about Wilbur?"

"Tommy... He's..."

"I know he's dead, Tubbo," Tommy grows sharp. Some part of him is scared it's already too late. *Dream hasn't come for you yet because he went after Wilbur first. Why are you even trying to save him? Only Dream has power over life and death, you're helpless.* Tommy shakes his head, trying to clear some of the fog. "S-Sorry- I meant- We have to hide him, we have to hide the body until we find Dream. Burying him won't be enough, Dream will just dig him up, I'd suggest burning him, but if we do that Dream can just use Ghostbur instead."

"But if we *burn* him-" Ranboo looks mildly horrified.

"He'll come back fine, better, in fact, than if we leave him to rot, so maybe we'll burn him once Dream is caught, but *until* then, we need to hide him." Tommy sounds so sure, like he's speaking from personal experience. He probably is, but none of them want to think about what that means.

Tubbo looks back to Phil. "We can... we can do that. We can do that tomorrow-"

"No. I am not waiting so my fucking brother can get kidnapped and tortured alone," Tommy remains harsh. There's something about that, *alone*; it's too close to *without me*.

"I'll go take care of him," Techno offers somewhat grudgingly.

"Techno-" Phil turns to him, surprised.

"Yeah, don't even try it, Phil. This is *not* the kind of job you should have to deal with," Techno refuses to waver. Yes, Wilbur had been Techno's friend, but he cannot expect

Wilbur's father to be the one to keep dragging around his corpse. "So, you just walk them back to wherever Tubbo is going."

Phil looks like he wants to keep arguing, but he caves. "Right, thank you, Techno."

"I want to see him," Tommy says it before he can stop himself.

"...Dude. Do you want us to hide him or do you want to see him?" Techno asks skeptically.

Tommy looks panicked. Every time they give him a choice, it feels like a dangerous thing. Tommy doesn't know what answer he's *supposed* to give. Every time Dream would ask him what he wanted to do, no matter what Tommy said, they still did whatever Dream wanted. Tommy's answer just determined if Dream had an excuse to be disappointed in him. "I'm sorry— I'm not— I'm not trying to make things harder, I just—"

"It's okay. We're not upset with you." Ranboo tries to soothe him. "Tommy, you're dead on your feet, please, you should get some rest—"

"*Dead on my feet?*" Tommy laughs, barking and sharp. It shakes him out of his fear. "Oh, Ranboo, you're a wrongun— joking about *my death*."

"Oh my god— I didn't— I am so sorry, Tommy—"

"I'm just *messing with you*," Tommy teases. He looks to Techno. "I want to see him. I'll— I'll go tomorrow, once I have Dream's notebook. See if there's... I dunno. Something." If Tommy treats this as a plan, as something to do and a set of tasks, it feels tangible, a little less hopeless.

"Yeah, gotcha. Won't take him too far then. Do you need me to come back?"

"Nah, get some rest. I'll let you know if anything changes. I think we've got it," Phil waves him off.

Techno gives him a nod before starting down the prime path.

Tommy watches him go.

*You're going to fix this. You told Wil the two of you were getting out together, and you're gonna make that true. Whatever it takes.*

"Are people looking for Dream right now?"

"Uh, yeah, I'd expect so," Tubbo keeps watching his expression, trying to read him.

"They know not to kill him, don't they?" Tommy turns back to face him. Tubbo keeps on forgetting Tommy's eyes are grey now.

"What'd you mean? We're trying to *stop* him, right? Whatever it takes?"

“No,” Tommy says forcefully. He’s so tired, but this is *important*. More important than just about anything. “You’ve got to get him alive. Whatever the cost, you hear me?” For once Tommy doesn’t flinch and change to a more subservient tone, his passion only grows as he steps closer. “Whatever it takes— if it means letting him escape, if it means letting him get to me, *whatever it takes*— anything, ay? If he fucking kills someone, you still gotta let him go, ‘cause as long as Dream is alive, *everyone* can be saved. We can *make* him tell us. Or— Or we’d bargain! If Dream only gives up the revive book if he has me—” Tommy finally hesitates in his rambling, taking a deep, trembling breath, ironing out some conviction Tubbo doesn’t understand yet. “Then you let him have me. I don’t care— I’m not—” Tommy is trying not to cry again. It’s harder to control the more exhausted he gets. He does care. He cares so badly it terrifies him, but he means it nonetheless. If going back to Dream were the only way to save them, it’s not even a question. “I’m not losing anyone else— I’m not losing *anyone*.”

Tubbo doesn’t have the words. It’s strange. The way Tommy talks about him— Tubbo won’t disillusion himself to think Tommy *likes* Dream, but there might be something worse there. It’s like Tommy has faith in him.

“I’ll... I’ll let Sapnap know. I think he was gonna lead the search,” is what Tubbo manages to say in reply, voice softer now. He cannot bring himself to acknowledge anything else Tommy had said.

Tommy thought he’d gotten used to being cold, but the cold of a stone room underground is subtler than the biting cold of wind and snow. His and Tubbo’s clothes are still wet from the mud. Tommy is shivering in minutes.

“Almost there, bossman. I’ll get a fire going,” Tubbo can feel him. He puts his hand over Tommy’s on his shoulder, trying to make up for the chill.

Tommy just nods. Tommy hasn’t seen snow since he ran to Techno’s place. Tommy sees lights. A cabin sits beside a frozen bay. Tommy has never been over here, which is promising. It’s definitely the middle of nowhere. Dream wouldn’t know where this is.

*Unless he’s watching you. He’s following and waiting until everyone leaves you. First Techno, now it’s just Phil, Ranboo, and Tubbo to protect you. Eventually Phil will go home. Then Ranboo will follow. Tubbo will do his best, but just like last time it won’t be enough to save you. Not like you can fucking fight, you can’t even walk on your own.*

The cabin is already warmer than outside. Tubbo kicks off his boots and hangs up his coat near a fireplace, Tommy follows suit.

“Here, Tommy,” Tubbo puts a blanket over his shoulders, nodding him to a chair by the fire before gathering wood. “Ranboo, could you get a golden apple for me while I start on the fire?”

“Sure.”

“Golden apple?” Tommy turns to Tubbo sharply. “What’d you need a golden apple for? You really expecting a fight that much?”

Tubbo gives him a look, laughing uncertainly. Tommy still doesn't follow.

"...it's for *you*, Tommy. You're still... rough. And I dunno if any more health pots would be a good idea," Tubbo explains.

"But I'm not eating," feels like a logical reply to Tommy, frowning.

"Yeah, but you *should* be."

"Alright then," Tommy mutters. He reaches his hands out once crackling flames cast warm light around the room. Warmth from a fireplace feels different to lava. Less sharp.

"Here, Tommy. This should be easier to eat, right?" Ranboo offers him the apple.

"Right," Tommy can't pretend he isn't hungry. Ranboo is right too. This is easier. Not quite food, but not a health potion either. Immediately he feels better, the pain dulls and he feels more awake than he has in a long time. "That... actually helped. Thanks, Ranboo."

"It was my idea!" Tubbo complains from the fireside.

"Fine, *fine*. Thank you too, Tubbo. Like I said, *clingy*," Tommy rolls his eyes.

"You're *welcome*. I'm gonna put on dry clothes, you can borrow something of mine, if you want," Tubbo goes to a chest.

"How the fuck am I gonna wear your trousers, Tubbo? They won't even reach my fuckin' ankles," Tommy teases.

"Oy!" Tubbo throws a sweater at his head. "You can borrow some of Ranboo's then."

Tommy flinches, covering his head instead of trying to catch it. He quickly tries to brush past it, feeling their eyes on him. He scoffs. "Why're *Ranboo's clothes* in your house, Tubbo?"

There isn't a joking reply to that one.

"...No, really. He, er, he hasn't replaced me, has he?" Tommy laughs nervously.

"No, definitely not," Tubbo says quickly.

"You know what, I am too tired to question this," Tommy shakes his head, peeling off his muddled shirt. It's easier than trying to unstick fabric caked with blood, stuck to open wounds. Tommy sees Tubbo out of the corner of his eye. "Can I fucking help you? Quit *staring* you're making me all nervous."

Tubbo has gone pale, and for a moment Tommy doesn't think Tubbo heard him, but Tubbo quickly shakes his head as if to clear it and looks away.

Tubbo could see Tommy's ribs. His best friend's skin hugs tightly to his skeleton and that's not even *touching* the scars. Tubbo recognizes an arrow wound through his shoulder, that's more familiar to him, a raised seam *directly on his spine* is another horror altogether, there's

another stab wound beside his heart, another arrow wound in his side, and some are scars that Tubbo cannot even fathom, strange shapes that he cannot match to any wound he understands. Tubbo knows a lot about scars. He knows how scar tissue can hurt and how hard it is to adjust to his own flesh in the aftermath. It's like the pattern of Tommy's skin has changed, some of the scars are just bits of white, but other scars are raised and still red, or deep, hollow scars that look like they healed around missing tissue rather than replacing it. Tubbo hadn't meant to stare, but now he doesn't think he'll be able to forget his friend looking like he'd been used as a cutting board for a few months.

"You boys should get some rest. I can take first watch," Phil takes a chair from the dining table in the corner, sitting back, sword resting at his side. *First watch*. Safe and warm in a friend's home doesn't change the fact that Tommy is still being hunted.

"Alright. You just wake me up in a few hours, Phil," Tubbo hands Ranboo a spare blanket. "Tommy, you can have my bed."

"I'm okay on the floor, Tubbo," Tommy wraps the blanket around his shoulders tighter as if to emphasize.

"Come on, Tommy. Just let me be nice to you," Tubbo smiles exasperatedly.

"Fine... if that's what you want," Tommy grumbles but obliges. "Doesn't seem fair..."

"A lot of things haven't been fair as of late, I'm happy with this one, though," Tubbo insists. "We'll take the pillows, how about that?"

Tommy hums something like a reply. Ranboo was right. Tommy is dead on his feet. He falls forward onto Tubbo's bed, burrowing under the blankets. He's settled before Tubbo has even joined Ranboo by the fire. He sleeps different now. Tubbo notices immediately. Tommy used to splay out, roll around, act like a nuisance back in the L'Manberg days when they were either camped out by a fire or crowded into the van. Now Tommy sleeps curled tightly into a ball, like he'd make himself smaller if he could, like even asleep he's trying to protect himself. Tubbo wants to go back to what they were before. He wants to sleep back to back with Tommy, knowing they'll look out for each other, Tubbo having to fight to get half of the blanket in the middle of the night, Tommy rolling over and almost on top of him, and still managing to keep sleeping. Even then, through the annoyance, Tubbo wouldn't have had it any other way. He doesn't know if it's his place to be that close to Tommy anymore. He'd be there if Tommy asked, but some part of him knows he isn't going to ask. He's his best friend and his brother, but Tubbo sees the way Tommy flinches away from every touch. He'll keep his distance, if that's what Tommy needs.

Tubbo sighs, laying beside Ranboo, facing the opposite way but still near his eye level, so looking over at Ranboo he looks upside down. Ranboo gives him half a smile. He can see Tubbo's exhaustion on his face.

"He's here, Tubbo. He's gonna be okay," Ranboo whispers. He is rarely certain, convictions are not easily won, but Ranboo says this with utter certainty. Enough that Tubbo might actually believe him.

“Yeah.” Maybe if Phil weren’t in the room, maybe if he knew for certain Tommy was asleep, just maybe Tubbo would’ve broken down and started crying in front of Ranboo. He just rolls over. “Thanks, bossman.”

Phil wakes Tubbo late in the night.

“Got a few more hours before dawn, but if you need more rest, grab Ranboo. And if anything happens, you get me, and we’ll get Techno too, alright?” Phil whispers, a warm, steady hand on Tubbo’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Phil,” Tubbo stands drowsily. Phil moves to take his place by the fire, Tubbo stops him for a moment. “Truly. Thank you for all of it.”

Phil wishes Tubbo didn’t look so battle weary. These are *kids*. None of them should be this tired. “It’s nothing, mate,” is all he can bring himself to say.

Tubbo takes up the post, Nightmare at his side. He keeps Tommy in his line of sight, backing up so the front door is in the corner of his eye as well. He scans the dark windows at every buffet of wind, every creak of the house. The mobs wandering the snow outside definitely don’t help. The shuffling footfalls of the dead are easy to discern from the living, but he’s never quite sure. Every time there’s a noise, Tubbo sits up, wired like a spring. He notices soon, Tommy flinches at every sound.

“Tommy?” Tubbo whispers.

No response.

“Tommy, can you hear me?” Tubbo crosses the room. His best friend is curled in a ball, hands covering his ears, eyes shut tightly. “Tommy?” Tubbo reaches out a hand and just barely touches Tommy’s arm.

Tommy bolts upright and backs into the wall with a gasp, disoriented as he tries to take in the cabin. It takes him far too long to get his bearings. He’s still looking around like he doesn’t understand where he is.

“Tommy, it’s okay, you’re safe, you’re at my place. I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to scare you,” Tubbo whispers. He keeps his hands raised passively, stepping back.

“Right... got it...” Tommy mutters, rubbing his eyes furiously. “Fucking hell, man...”

“Sorry.” An anxious pause, Tubbo waiting for Tommy to give some indication of feeling and Tommy uncomfortable with the attention.

“Don’t just stand there,” Tommy nods Tubbo over, patting the mattress beside him. “Did... did something happen, or..?”

Tubbo sits down. “I just... wasn’t sure if you were asleep,” it sounds like such a feeble defense now. Tubbo had just wanted Tommy to stop flinching.

“I dunno if I was...” Tommy seems to be expecting judgement. “It was probably the apple, eh? Those things’ll keep you up and ready for a fight like nothing else...”

“Yeah,” Tubbo remembers those days. Golden apples were a rarity, and diamond armor was the best they could manage for war. They can defend themselves better now, but Tubbo doesn’t think that means they’re better off.

Another moment of pause.

“I kept on hearing him,” Tommy whispers.

Tubbo feels sick. He knows what Tommy means, but he says it anyway. “What’s that?”

“I keep on thinking I hear him,” Tommy watches the windows. They remain dark and empty, the white flurries of snow instead of the white of a mask. “Walking around outside. Even without the fuckin’ apple, I dunno how I’m supposed to sleep. He’s out there, man. He was supposed to come for me, *he was supposed to come after me*. He said he always would. A- And if he’s not coming for me, what the fuck else could he be doing?”

“I don’t know, Tommy.” Tubbo wishes he had answers, he wishes after everything he could just give his brother peace. Instead that dark thought rises once more, the way Tommy speaks about Dream, *faith*.

“Yeah...”

“But he’s not getting to you again, okay?” Tubbo doesn’t make these claims lightly. He believes it with every fiber of his being, *nothing* is going to hurt Tommy like that ever again. “You’re not alone in this. Not anymore. And it’s not just me. The whole server knows at this point. None of us are gonna let him get away with this.”

“I mean, I wasn’t alone in all of it. I had Wil.” Tommy says it like it’s the simplest thing in the world, some innate truth as constant as gravity that Tubbo doesn’t understand.

Tubbo *can’t* understand it. As far as he knows it, Wilbur is the one who left them in this mess. He’s the one who left Tubbo with rubble and a country and an impossible decision to make. And here’s Tommy, the one who Wilbur had factored into his suicide, the one he had wanted to become president of a crater first, grateful that Wilbur had been dead enough to stay beside him when Tubbo couldn’t. Tubbo can’t help but think if Wilbur had never died it never would’ve gotten this bad in the first place, but he knows better. Everything points to Dream taking Tommy, regardless of who tried to stop him. *Maybe you just think that because you barely tried to stop him. All it took was Dream getting pissed and you let Tommy go. Worse, you sent him away, right into Dream’s hands.*

“I’m so sorry, Tommy,” Tubbo can’t help but say it. He knows an apology changes nothing and it wavers too close to something like pity, but he says it anyway. He doesn’t elaborate or specify. There’s too much. He’s sorry this happened to him, he’s sorry he let him go, that he didn’t fight harder for him, that he didn’t save him sooner, that he never checked up on him, that he wasn’t braver or stronger or more willing to listen to his heart. That the last thing he



did was shout at him, that he called his best friend selfish before being the one who left him to die. It's all worthless.

"It's okay. I'm gonna get him back." Tommy wasn't thinking about any of that. He's still just thinking about Wilbur. Tommy slouches sideways, falling so his head rests on Tubbo's shoulder. "You'll stay with me?"

"As long as you'll have me," Tubbo keeps his right hand on Nightmare, putting his left one around Tommy's shoulders. Even holding him doesn't feel the same anymore, those familiar scrawny shoulders are emaciated, but Tubbo will hold onto him all the same.

This time, when Tommy falls asleep, he doesn't flinch. Not that he isn't still scared, not that every sound doesn't set him on edge, but this time he just holds on tighter.

Tommy wakes up confused. He's leaning on someone. Dream would never let him fall asleep on him. If it's Wilbur, then he's dead. But there's warmth, there's feeling around him. It's not the train station. Tommy squints in the light coming in, bright and white from reflecting off the snow. The cabin is less warm now, the fire having died down to embers. Tommy is leaning on Tubbo.

He's in *Tubbo's house*.

Strange. It doesn't feel real. Less real to him than being dead.

"Morning, bossman," Tubbo is still awake. He looks tired, though.

"Did I keep you up?" Tommy asks, sitting up stiffly. His whole body aches, but that's the most normal thing about waking up here.

"Er, no. I was supposed to be up. I was on watch," Tubbo stretches as well. His left arm had fallen asleep.

"Right... sorry..." Tommy mutters, rubbing his eyes. Even the light from the windows feels too bright. Wait—shit. Where did he put Eret's sunglasses? He can't remember. Tubbo's bandana is still there, finally dry, if not still stiff from dried blood. He's wearing one of Tubbo's sweaters. That's good. He's okay. He's still hungry, his head hurts from the light, but he's okay.

"Ah, thank fuck—" Once Tommy lets go, Tubbo stands, stretching further. "I didn't mind, but holy shit, middle of the night, I thought my arm was gonna fall off."

"Sorry..."

"You don't need to be sorry, Tommy," Tubbo looks at him, surprised. He's starting to realize he needs to tread lightly around Tommy, not just physically, but in every regard. He doesn't want to treat Tommy like he's scared of everything, but that may as well be true, all things considered.

"Okay," Tommy doesn't seem to know what to do now. He's resisting the urge to apologize again. Tubbo is staring at him, almost confused. Tommy doesn't like it when people pause

and just look at him. He feels like he's in trouble. Tubbo seems to sense his discomfort and turns away.

"Ranboo," Tubbo goes up beside the fire, nudging his friend with his foot.

"Wha-?" Ranboo groggily awakens. "Wha's happening?" He rubs his eyes.

"It's morning. You didn't even take watch last night. No excuse," Tubbo pokes him again.

"Fine, fine..." Ranboo grumbles.

Tommy watches Ranboo for a moment. Two simple words, *no excuse*, would've terrified him. Ranboo doesn't even flinch.

Tommy is starting to realize there might be more wrong with him than he first thought, and that is saying something.

"Breakfast?" Tubbo asks, rummaging through his cabinets.

"Mhm, if you don't mind," Phil is awake, it seems, his hat pulled down over his face.

"I don't have much. Oh, wait! I have some eggs! And bread. And I should have some coffee left too," Tubbo gathers ingredients, behind him, Ranboo reignites the fire.

Tommy watches them all with a disconnected sort of interest. None of them seem especially nervous to be here.

"Tommy? Will you eat eggs?"

"Huh?" Tommy turns back to Tubbo. "I... I dunno. Haven't had them in a while. Can I have some water?"

"Yeah, sure. Or coffee? Or hot chocolate, I should have the stuff to make somewhere," Tubbo is still eagerly trying to play host.

"I think coffee might actually kill me," Tommy laughs roughly. Hot chocolate sounds good, chocolate is definitely something he's missed. "Water is fine." He's still scared of the unknown, or rather the forgotten. All of this should seem familiar to him. And knowing why it doesn't also doesn't make it any better. Part of him just wants to find a dark corner with stone floors so he can curl up in a ball and hold onto something he *does* find familiar now. The dark is safe. Painful sometimes, sure, but safe.

"Alright, well, I'll make enough that if you want some, it'll be here," Tubbo caves, but he looks disappointed that Tommy refused. "I was gonna message Ponk too, see if they'd come over. I know you said... well, you said it felt like the usual pain, which just makes me think maybe you aren't the best judge. So, if it's alright with you, I still want them just to see."

Tommy looks grim. "Okay." Dream's tending to wounds wasn't exactly gentle. He's not enthused by the thought.

Tubbo notices his hesitation. “Tommy, do you *want* a doctor to look at you?”

Tommy stares at him, looking almost panicked. “I... I’m sorry, I just thought— Whatever you want is fine, Dream—” Tommy’s expression turns from worry to horror in an instant. “I meant Tubbo! Fuck— I meant to say, Tubbo— I dunno why I—”

Tubbo can’t pretend he isn’t horrified as well. He doesn’t want to do anything, to *be* anything, that can somehow exist beside that monster in Tommy’s mind. “It’s okay, Tommy. I’m sorry if I pushed the whole doctor thing, I’m just—” *I’m just scared. I’m scared that you’re in pain and you won’t tell anyone because you’re scared too. I’m so scared we’re just going to lose you again. That after everything, it’s going to be an infected wound or malnourishment that takes you away from me forever. I can’t stop Dream right now, but I can do this.* Tubbo can’t say all that. “If you don’t want to, Tommy. Then that’s it. We won’t. It’s whatever *you* want.”

Tommy nods quickly, trying to think. *Whatever you want.* He has to want something. “I’m sorry, I’m thinking.”

“Take your time, man. You can take all the time you need, just let me know,” Tubbo returns to the stove.

Tommy nods. *What do you want? You want things. You want—you wanted Dream’s praise and his mercy. You want Wilbur back. You want to feel safe. You want for this to have never happened to you. You want to go home even though you are home. What do you want now?*

“Here’s some water,” Ranboo hands him a glass, which Tommy accepts gratefully. Just as before, he drinks the better half of it immediately, like he’s still waiting for someone to take it from him.

“Hey, Tommy, wanna sit with us? There’s enough food that if you change your mind and want something, it’s there,” Tubbo nods him over to the dining table, Tommy joining them without qualms.

Even the smell of the eggs is almost too much. Maybe he could handle bread. Tommy had had bread in the past few months. He has one bite, washed down almost painfully with water, and he has to stop. He feels sick.

“Do you want a regular apple? Or even a golden apple. You could probably eat a few of those before it becomes a problem,” Tubbo asks.

Tommy shrugs. He hates that Tubbo looks so disappointed.

“I—I think I made a decision,” Tommy speaks up perhaps a bit too loudly, silencing the rest of the table. He shrinks in on himself, unsure if he should make eye contact. It’s different when no one wears a mask. “Tubbo, I... I want you to choose for me.” Tommy nods resolutely, leaning back in his chair. The silence stretches on. He looks proud, like this is somehow progress; and how can Tubbo tell him it’s not?

“Oh...Okay, bossman. Uh. Well, I wanted them to come. Like, you’re still limping and things, and if something’s broken, Ponk could help. If that’s alright with you,” Tubbo still hesitates.

“I say yes,” Tommy still sounds proud, he holds his ability to give consent like a prize.

The three others present all stare at him, doing their best not to look deeply concerned.

Tommy still slouches away from the attention. “And... could Techno come back? So he can take me to Wil later?”

“Er, sure thing, mate, I’ll send him a message,” Phil nods.

“And I’ll reach out to Ponk, then,” Tubbo stands, quickly clearing plates, looking lost in worried thought.

Then it’s just Tommy and Ranboo.

“Did you really show up in the dark cell that day?” Tommy asks before he can stop himself.

“D-Did I-?” Ranboo sputters, at the very least surprised, not to mention the words *the dark cell* are more than a little terrifying, even if the title is fitting. He also doesn’t know how to explain. “Yes. Well, I think so. I don’t remember it very well. I saw you on the floor in an obsidian room and you looked—” Ranboo stops himself. It’s like trying to remember a dream, but nothing is going to save him from the image of Tommy’s battered face, broken fingers reaching out as he begged for help... “Yeah. I think so.”

Tommy puts a hand on Ranboo’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Thanks for showing up. Was it your endermen buddies? There were a few times, I saw endermen, I talked to one, which...” Tommy shudders. “Mixed results, but I dunno... I think Dream was worried they were gonna report back to you or something, so it made me hope that you might’ve... I dunno. Felt stupid then, absolutely insane, but also like it was... something.”

“Oh,” Ranboo tries to process that. Those words, *it made me hope*, that almost made Ranboo proud, if he weren’t so disconcerted by the rest of it. “I’m sorry, Tommy. I don’t remember *how* I knew, I barely remembered I knew at all.”

“Ah, well. Glad you did.” Tommy hopes that those words can somehow tell Ranboo how grateful he is.

“Me too.”

“Tommy, I can make more eggs. Or I could make toast, or whatever you want, bossman, just let me know,” Tubbo says. “Ponk should be here in a bit, but if you want food after, I don’t mind.”

“Right, thanks Tubbo,” Tommy looks apprehensive. After what Ranboo had seen Tommy survive in the past two days alone, he can’t possibly think of what would make him so nervous now.

“Hey, you alright, man?”

“What? Fine, I’m fine,” Tommy is almost defensive.

“Come on, if you don’t want to see someone, you can just say it,” Ranboo doesn’t want to push, but he has to make sure Tommy knows this.

“It’s not that. I like Ponk— Ponk is great, it’s just... I don’t really wanna be poked and prodded right now,” Tommy winces at the very thought. “Even just... even just *hugging* you guys is almost too much— not that there’s anything *you* did,” he says quickly, “it’s just... everything feels like too much right now and w-whenever Dream looked for injuries—” Tommy sighs shakily. “A-And that was when he was being *nice*, when he was taking care of me...” It’s such a stark contrast. Dream would try to soothe him, tell him it would be okay, tell him he wasn’t in trouble, as he set broken bones he made, as he stitched wounds he opened in the first place. And Tommy had been grateful. He had genuinely thought that was what gentleness was. Tommy has been free less than 24 hours, and he’s been given more kindness than he’s had in the past months at all. No one has hit him, they haven’t even shoved him or grabbed onto him or given him orders. When they say it’s okay, that he’s safe, that he’s not in trouble, it doesn’t come with a tight hold around his wrist or a hand pressing down on his shoulder so he can’t move. It’s a hard contrast to reconcile with what Tommy had deemed ‘good’ during his time with Dream. Tommy lived sixteen years before now, where he defined ‘good’ by his brother, his best friend, his comrades and allies and his friends and neighbors, and every definition, everything he knew for certain, every foundation of how Tommy engaged with his fucking reality was wiped clean. Dream unmade him and then remade someone else.

“Tommy...” Ranboo reaches out to take Tommy’s hand before stopping himself. *Even just hugging you guys is almost too much.* “Nothing is gonna happen to you here that you don’t want. If it’s too much, Ponk won’t come. And if at any point you want space, you just have to say so.”

Tommy almost manages a smile. He’s trying not to bury himself in his own head. “I know. I trust you all, guess I don’t trust how I... I dunno, fucking *respond* to it all or whatever.”

“Okay, well. Whatever you need, we’ll do, okay?” It’s all Ranboo can think to offer.

“Hey, guys!” Ponk announces their arrival with a shout through the door alongside a knock. “It’s me! And Sam. Sam is here too.”

“Why do you say that like you’re making fun of me?” Sam drolly replies as Tubbo lets them in.

“Because I *am*, Sam! You didn’t need to walk me all the way out here!” Ponk enters the cabin with a shiver, kicking snow off their shoes, Sam close behind, Netherite armor on and sword at his side. “Although, you never said you were out in the snow, Tubbo! It’s cold as hell outside!”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, Ponk,” Tubbo at least looks apologetic. “I have coffee?”

“Yes! I’d love coffee,” Ponk spots Tommy. “There’s my favorite patient! You look better already.”

“Hey, Ponk. Long time no see,” Tommy manages a smile. “No need to spare my feelings. I’m completely fucked up.”

“Ahh, I’ve seen worse.” Ponk begins pulling potions from their inventory, piling them messily on the dining table.

“Have you?”

“Well, maybe not, but don’t worry! I’m the best doctor on the server.”

“Ponk, you’re the only doctor on the server.”

“That’s besides the point!” Ponk continues to search for something. “There it is! I knew I didn’t forget it,” Ponk has their stethoscope. “Tommy, wanna sit up on the table for me?”

Tommy obliges, legs swinging over the edge, his hands fidgeting in his lap.

“I’m gonna check out your heart, okay?” Ponk waits for him to nod before pressing the cold metal to his skin.

Tommy doesn’t know why he feels like this is a test he can somehow fail. Tommy isn’t nervous about Ponk. They’re someone safe. They wear a mask, but it’s nothing like *his* mask. Tommy can see Ponk’s warm brown eyes, and their voice is always light and friendly, nothing hidden behind it.

“I’m gonna check your breathing now,” Ponk tells him before they move the stethoscope.

“Can you take a deep breath for me?” A pause. “Alright, I’m gonna put it on your back now. Can you take another deep breath?” Ponk steps back, taking off the stethoscope.

“Alright, good! Your heart is doing fine, a little fast, but nothing to be worried about. Your breathing is a little rattled, might be an upper respiratory thing, which makes sense, you haven’t been... uh, strong, health-wise lately, so your immune system might not be in the best shape. I recommend a lot of vitamin C! I will bring you lemons myself.” Ponk nods.

“Got it,” Tommy does not mention the fact that he hasn’t been able to eat carrots, let alone something as strong as lemons.

“You had some oxygen deprivation, am I right?” Ponk rummages through their pockets again.

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Tommy supposes being strangled to the point of unconsciousness counts.

“Have you had any head injuries lately?”

Tommy frowns, trying to think back. “Not since I last died, I don’t think.”

Ponk laughs. “Since you last—” They catch Tubbo’s eye. “*Oh*, oh, right. Umm. Do things... er, carry over?”

“Sometimes. I...” Tommy sighs, rubbing his eyes. His head hurts. “I dunno.”

“That’s okay, Tommy,” Ponk sounds surprisingly gentle. They’re loud and kind and always in motion, but here they slow down. “I’m gonna treat it like I would if I thought you might have a concussion. I’m gonna have to shine a light in your eyes, is that okay?”

Tommy grimaces. “Yeah, I fuckin’ guess so...”

“Mate, I’m not doing anything you don’t want, alright?” Ponk folds their arms over their chest, resolute.

Tommy gives them a look. They’re not budging until he says what he wants to do. “I won’t like it, but... I trust you. If it’s what you gotta do, I’m okay. I mean that.”

“Alright. I’ll be quick then, Tommy,” Ponk returns with a flashlight pen. “Just stare straight ahead.”

Tommy’s nails dig into the wooden table. The light hurts. It’s the closest to torture he’s experienced since getting back. Ponk stops within seconds.

“Eyes are dilating like normal! That’s good. Means you don’t seem to have a head injury,” Ponk continues on. “Okay, now you’ve got to tell me— what hurts? Does anything feel broken or like you can’t move right or anything like that?”

Tommy laughs harshly. “That’s a funny sort of question, isn’t it, Ponk?”

Ponk hesitates, like they’re missing a joke, but no one else seems to understand what Tommy means either. Before Tommy can elaborate, there’s another knock at the door. Tubbo grabs his axe immediately.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Phil calms him down quickly. “It’s just Techno.”

“Yeah, I was summoned,” Techno says dryly, shaking snow out of his hair as he crosses the threshold. “Here to take Tommy to see... uh. Somethin’.” Techno glances to Sam and Ponk, unsure if he should announce the status of Wilbur’s body. The little cabin is getting crowded now. Tommy hasn’t been around this many people since— well, technically since yesterday, but in the grand scheme of things, outside of that adrenaline flooded haze, the first time he’s been around this many people in months.

“See, Technoblade came here alone!” Ponk turns back to Sam pointedly.

“Yeah, well, Technoblade is *Technoblade*. Still, I don’t think anyone should be going around the server alone right now,” Sam remains resolute. “I know you can take care of yourself, Ponkie, but I felt better going with you.”

“Fine, *fine*, you big old softie!” Ponk teases him. “Anyway! Tommy, you were, uh, telling me... something?”

Tommy shrugs. "It's hard to tell, man. What's normal pain and what isn't."

"Uh, Tommy, you know there shouldn't *be* normal pain, right?" Ranboo cuts in worriedly.

Tommy pauses, like that thought hadn't occurred to him. "Ah. Well. Told you guys I was fucked up."

"How about you just... tell me what comes to mind?" Ponk shuffles from foot to foot.

"Uh, yeah," Tommy tries to think. Normally when he wakes, from unconsciousness or the dead, he takes inventory on his condition. That inventory usually just establishes if he's missing any limbs or actively bleeding out or paralyzed. He's none of those things right now.

"Um." Tommy is genuinely stumped. His whole body aches, pretty much. Everything is too bright, he's sensitive to every touch, despite his inability to eat he *is* still starving, but somehow all of that feels like something not worth sharing. "Dunno... just hurts..." He mumbles instead.

No one seems to know what to do with that.

"Okay, Tommy. Would you be okay with me just making sure you can move okay? Look for broken bones and shit? You don't have broken ribs, which is, you know, pretty damn important, but I could make sure nothing else is broken or anything," Ponk offers. They're not sure how Tommy could just *not notice* a broken bone, but they also know Tommy is, understandably, not all there right now.

Tommy nods slowly. "That's fine, I guess."

"Right, I'm gonna start with your left hand, is that okay?" Ponk asks.

Tommy nods. He wants to say *y'know you don't have to fucking check with me before you do every little thing* but the truth of it is Tommy finds it comforting. Ponk is slow and careful with him, getting his approval before each step, but they ask calmly, naturally, they're not patronizing.

Ponk checks his hand. Other than the missing finger, nothing seems to be injured, and there isn't any loose bone from the severed finger, it was cut cleanly at the knuckle. Ponk does their best not to overthink that. They also try not to think about the scars around every fingernail. It's not like they can't see it for what it is. Tommy had scratched away at something until he bled, until his nails were ripped apart. They keep moving. "All good there, can I check your arm?" Once Tommy nods, they continue. "Can you like, spin your arm for me? As far as it'll go around without hurting." Tommy obliges. "Okay, full range of motion, that's good! Now let's see your right..."

Tommy should not feel so warmed by praise. He finds it almost desperately reassuring. Praise had meant survival for far too long. Tommy *needs* to know he's doing something right. That's the only way he can tell if he should be waiting for a punishment or not.

"Easier to look for breaks, eh?" Tommy says when Ponk checks over his right arm.



“What’s that, mate?”

“Y’know, ‘cause I’m so skinny now,” Tommy says brightly. Almost like it’s something to be proud of. Tommy sees Ponk’s expression change just from their eyes. Tommy doesn’t know what it’ll take for people to stop being horrified by him. It’s not just Ponk. Whatever conversation had drifted around the room dies in an instant. No one says anything about it, though. No one knows what to say to that. Tommy takes note. That sort of comment is wrong, then. Tommy feels like he should know it’s wrong.

“Y-Yeah, about that,” Ponk does their best to remain clinical despite the horror. “You’re *really* under weight. So. You should try and eat three meals a day, start slow, work your way up. Don’t worry about it being healthy or whatever the fuck, just eat, whatever you can, okay?”

Tommy scowls. “Yeah, right, I’m workin’ on it…”

“Good. Well, uh,” Ponk steps back. “If you can’t think of anything else—”

“What about your limp?” Tubbo cuts them off. “Tommy, your left leg, is that hurt?”

“What? No,” Tommy frowns, confused. Tubbo gives him a look. “What’d you mean?!” Tommy turns defensive in an instant.

“Tommy, wanna take a little stroll around the room for me?” Ponk gestures forward.

“Fuckin’ fine…” Tommy is getting tired of this. He takes a few steps before he realizes. “Oh, Tubbo, that’s not— That’s nothing new, that’s old,” is how he explains it.

“Tommy, *old* doesn’t make it okay,” Tubbo says perhaps a little too sharply.

Tommy’s shoulders hunch inward as he sits back onto the table.

“Do you know what it’s from, Tommy?” Ponk asks.

“Uh, yeah. I can’t feel as much in my left leg. Makes me walk sort of funny.” Tommy wishes everyone would stop staring at him.

“Oh. Do you know… why that is?” Ponk tries.

“Months and months ago I had to do a tourniquet to stop me from bleeding out. But I died anyway, and Dream brought me back— well, I didn’t know that was what he was doing at the time, but same thing either way— and ever since, it’s just been,” Tommy nods to his left leg, which he swings under the table. Everyone pieces together what he said slowly.

“Does it hurt you?” Ranboo is the first to speak up.

“Nah, not really. Just normal… pain…” Tommy cringes. “You know what Tubbo, now that I’m hearing that again, it *does* sound bad, but I mean, what’re we gonna do about it? About a hundred resurrections couldn’t fix it, what’re *you* all gonna do?” Tommy sits back, like he’s defensive of his own injuries. “No offense, Ponk.”

“That's alright.”

“Tommy, if it *hurts* you...” Tubbo’s voice tremors for a moment. He’s tired of feeling helpless. It’s like he’s rescued Tommy, but he’s still unable to *save* him. Not really, not from all this.

“Hey, hold on, I’ve got an idea– I’ve got an old cane! From when I was getting used to my legs,” Ponk speaks up.

“When you were *what*?” Ranboo interjects.

“My legs! From Sam,” Ponk says fondly, looking back to Sam standing behind them. They pull up their right trouser leg, enough that they can all see metal. “Lost ‘em at the red festival. That was before your time, Ranboo.”

Technoblade shifts uncomfortably behind them all. “Oh. Uhhh.” A painful pause. Technoblade hadn’t given much thought to it, but undeniably, he’d been the one to fire rockets into the crowd. “...Sorry about that.” It feels like a pathetic consolation.

Ponk shrugs. “Eh. Bygones. Maybe one day I’ll get my revenge when you least expect it,” Ponk says, mischief apparent.

“Okay, that’s not terrifying at all,” Techno says dryly.

Tommy scowls. “I don’t need a fucking *cane*. What, am I Philza’s age, now?”

“Oy!” Phil cuts in.

“What’re you on about, Tommy? Am *I* old?” Ponk turns scolding.

“...No.”

“Then don’t knock the motherfucking cane,” Ponk folds their arms over their chest. “I got my balance back after a few months, and hey, I could do some research into physical therapy shit, but in the mean time, I bet it’ll help.”

Tommy looks guiltier now. “Sorry... I didn’t mean like... I dunno. Just sorry.”

“Sorry for *what*, man? You’ve been too *proud* for as long as I’ve known you! You’ll get over it. Canes are kickass either way. Just wait until you can start hitting people with it,” Ponk changed the mood quickly. The momentary lull of worry and pity they had fallen into just from Tommy speaking is broken by a few charming quips. Tommy remembers Ponk always being good like that. Tommy’s chest aches. He misses when *he* could change a mood like that, when he was better at making people laugh and roll their eyes instead of staring at him, heartbroken, the way they all do now. “Alright! Other than food, you should try to sleep as much as you can. And try and do *mild exercise*. I mean going on walks, not running down the prime path, got it?”

“I’d never *run* down the prime path,” Tommy is offended by the very thought.

“Good, then! I’ll bring you the cane later, alright?” Ponk grows more serious. “If you’re in pain, Tommy, golden apples on occasion, but not too often, and if it gets really bad, turtle master helps a *lot*. It’ll make you drowsy so you’ll sleep better too. But that’s more for emergencies,” Ponk starts packing up, leaving a few potions on the table for them.

“Thanks, doc,” Tommy sounds sarcastic, but the thanks are genuine.

“Yeah! Any time, Tommy. Any time. Bye, guys!” Ponk turns to Sam. “You ready to *escort me back*?” They say mockingly.

“Yeah, actually, I am. Do you want me to carry you over the snow, so your shoes don’t get wet?” Sam teases back.

“Oh, yeah, you say that now, big man, but just you wait, I’ll make you carry me! I’ll do it!”

Their banter continues as they leave. Tommy smiles. It’s nice to have people around who treat him like nothing has changed.

“Cool, now that you have a clean bill of health– or, something like it I guess. You up for a... er, field trip?” Techno asks awkwardly.

“Oh, right,” Tommy’s moment of peace dies. He has to do this. The first step in getting Wilbur back is to see just how he was stolen from him.

## Chapter End Notes

In case you couldn't tell, I love Ponk <3 This chapter is more lighthearted filler content, but after this the plot will, somewhat, resume. This will be a slower journey from here on out, a puzzle rather than a race. Sorta. idk, metaphors, who knows!

Also- it’s been over a year now since I started writing dsmp fics. When did that happen. [Techno Comes Home](#) my first dsmp fic I finished just over a year ago. Wild.

Anyway. As always, feedback is cherished <3 hearing your thoughts fuels me, here or at [my tumblr!](#)

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

TW: trouble eating and a familiar dead body. Not at the same time, though, lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tubbo, you said you had Dream’s journal, right?” Tommy asks.

“I do. I’ll– I’ll have to find it,” Tubbo stumbles over his words.

Tommy doesn’t seem to notice, lost in thought. “I was hoping– I wanted to take a look at it, see if there’s anything useful before I go to Wil.”

“Phil and I made a copy too,” Techno adds. “So, worst comes to worst I can track that down.”

“Right. Good, then,” Tommy nods resolutely, grabbing his now dry shoes from their place by the fire.

“Where’d you put him?” Phil turns to Techno.

“I... sorta... I put him under Ghostbur’s house. Under the sewer. It’s cold down there ‘cause of the water, so,” Techno grew sheepish.

Tommy didn’t react to his words, all of his focus in front of him. Tommy’s hands still shake. But he’d done it. He’d tied his shoelaces. Tommy feels an almost giddy pride rising, a swell of hope. It’s something so small it should feel insignificant, he should feel like he’s just barely keeping it together, but he doesn’t. He feels *better*. Or maybe not better just yet, but he *can* get better. He won’t be stuck like this forever.

“Right, then,” Tommy stands, swaying on his feet, his vision growing spotted for a moment, but it clears and he stays standing. “Shall we?”

“Phil, you’re not coming, are you?” Techno stops his friend with a worried look.

“To–? Nah. I... I’ve seen him,” Phil winces. “I was gonna go back to L’Manberg, though. Try to get some more sleep, if you don’t mind sticking around here for a bit?”

“Yeah, why not,” Techno shrugs. He holds back a dry comment about being left to babysit. He has a feeling Tommy doesn’t need to be made out to feel like a burden right now. “Come on, Tommy. Let’s get this over with.” Still, Techno’s dead-side manners could use some work.

“Why the rush? Not like Wilbur’s going anywhere,” Tommy laughs hoarsely.

Maybe Techno is the perfect amount of insensitive for Tommy to deal with right now. Fair enough.

The rest of their company leaves, and only Ranboo and Tubbo remain. There’s a pause, neither of them sure what to do now that Tommy is out of their care. Tubbo keeps on staring at the front door. Ranboo just watches Tubbo.

“You *know* where Dream’s journal is. I saw you put it in your Enderchest. Why’d you say that?” Ranboo isn’t accusing, but he has a feeling Tubbo has a reason.

“I know.” Tubbo sighs. “I... I don’t want him to see it. And I know I can’t stop him, a-and nothing in that book can be worse than him *living* it, but... guess I just wanted to put it off a little while longer.” Tubbo hates that he lied to Tommy so easily. He’s just scared, but he won’t let that be an excuse. “I’ll give it to him when he gets back.”

“You know, giving it to him after he sees his brother’s dead body won’t lessen the blow,” Ranboo points out bluntly.

Tubbo gives him a look, before it seems another thought occupies him. It looks like he wants to say something more.

“You good?”

“I want to step down as president,” Tubbo bursts out. “I- I’m *going* to step down as president. And... and right now I think I might just end up handing the position to Quackity while we try and figure out an election, but I know you were going to run for it, and I didn’t want to not let you have that chance.”

Ranboo stares at him, just below his eyeline. “Uh.”

“Sorry, sorry— that was a lot to throw at you,” Tubbo presses a hand to his forehead. His head hurts, a migraine just behind his eyes. Those had grown more common the longer he’d been president. “I just— I can’t keep doing this, Ranboo. I was barely a president after he died, and now, with Dream still bloody out there— how can I leave him? *How can I leave him?*”

“*Tubbo*,” Ranboo gently holds Tubbo’s shoulders. “It’s okay. I... I think I understand. After all of this, and L’Manberg the way it is now... well, let’s just say me, Phil, and Quackity can take care of ourselves. Even Quackity... he spends more time up on that mountain of his.”

“Would you want the position?” There’s something desperate behind Tubbo’s eyes, Ranboo can’t tell if he wants him to accept it or refuse. “I don’t want to take it from you and give it to Quackity, it— It should be fair. A proper election, then. We can’t just *dissolve* it. L’Manberg meaning something is w-why— It’s—” Tubbo’s voice shakes. He refuses to cry the moment he is no longer needed. He takes a deep breath. “Being responsible for you all. I- It’s why I—*fuck*, why is this so hard?” Tubbo turns away, looking out at the snow. It’s so bright his eyes are watering. That’s the only reason. “I s-sacrificed Tommy—”

“Tubbo—”

“No, Ranboo, we both know that’s what it was!” Tubbo snaps. “I *sacrificed Tommy*, because I needed to protect you all first. And if I let all of this die, it’s— It was for nothing. It means L’Manberg should’ve died then and we should’ve gone down with it, *with Tommy*—”

Tubbo is silenced by Ranboo pulling him into a hug.

“I’m so sorry, Tubbo,” Ranboo says softly. “This never should’ve been put on you— it was never—” He sighs. “I’m sorry.”

Tubbo hugs back, clutching fistfuls of Ranboo’s suit jacket, leaning into him. This is the first time he’s cried in front of someone since he saw Tommy dead, too many months ago. No more does he save his tears for a gravestone, Ranboo holds him as Tubbo finally lets free all of the hurt behind the anger.

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“You *sure* you want to do this, Tommy?” Techno doesn’t know how this kid is still standing, let alone trudging ahead towards something that will only hurt him.

“I got to see it for myself,” Tommy remains utterly set. He’s grateful Techno doesn’t acknowledge when he grabs onto his arm to stay standing. He doesn’t look ahead, his eyes remained focused on the ground, squinting in the dim overcast light.

“Alright, alright...” Techno sighs, pushing on, sometimes reaching out a hand for Tommy to grab when he stumbles. Neither of them acknowledge how weak he still is either. He probably shouldn’t even be making this trip.

Tommy should still be scared out of his mind, walking unarmed right through the mainlands of the SMP, but the towering figure beside him, pig snout and all, Tommy feels safe. Strange. Last time Technoblade failed to save him, and there’s no reason to think he’ll be able to succeed this time, but at least Tommy knows he won’t die alone.

“I dunno if you should've put him here,” Tommy mutters, staring around the city on stilts he never really got to be in. It doesn’t feel like his L’Manberg. He feels like this should mean something, being back here. Even the Camarvan is just an imitation, an imitation surrounded by rubble that won’t let him forget. More than Wilbur is stuck in another time.

“Hey, man. You’re the one who wanted to *hide* him. If you want him to have a pretty burial, I am not your guy,” Techno shrugs.

“No, because... because Dream needs Wilbur’s body and if not that, Ghostbur would be the next step,” Tommy explains easily. “You’ve put them too close together.”

“...Right. Well, if Dream were gonna go after Ghostbur, wouldn’t he have already done it? He knows where Ghostbur lives, or where he *doesn’t* live, I guess,” Techno laughs dryly.

“I guess...” Tommy stumbles climbing uphill to the entrance to Ghostbur’s sewer home, grabbing onto Techno’s arm. “...just don’t like it,” he mutters.

“Yeah, what’s not to like about *that* typa guy still lurking around,” Techno says sarcastically, still scanning the horizon for anyone approaching. “You keep an eye out, I’m gonna make sure no one’s waiting down there,” with that, Techno descends into the sewer. Tommy feels a flicker of panic, looking around. There isn’t really anywhere to hide here. Maybe Fundy’s house— or his *old* house, rather. Too much has changed. It’s hard for him to see. Where the *fuck* did he put Eret’s sunglasses? Tommy still wears a coat borrowed from Tubbo. He pulls the hood down lower over his face.

“All good! You can come down now,” Techno calls back up. Tommy joins him, and hates that he feels relieved to be back within four walls. The sky is too big now. He doesn’t remember it being that big. At least in Limbo there was no sense of *depth*, here, the clouds tell him just how vast it all is. “Right, you wanna wait there for a minute? Gotta dig.”

Tommy stands there, staring out the metal grate that the water runoff pours from. He doesn’t like that they make him think of a cage.

“Alright, I gotta warn you, man. He hasn’t really been cleaned up. I think Callahan mighta washed some of the blood off, but he’s... well, he’s dead, y’know.”

Tommy has died dozens of times. He watched Schlatt die, he watched MD die, but this is a different sort of dead. That bitter middleground between when they stop moving and when they get dismembered at their own funeral. Wilbur has not begun to rot, but he is well and truly a corpse. A corpse as Tommy understands it, anyway. The closest he got was himself becoming unrotted. So the first dead body he sees, cooled and stiff and grey, is Wilbur.

Tommy doesn’t feel grief. He feels numb.

The blood dried to his throat looks almost black now, attempts to wash it away had been made, but there’s too much of it. His eyes are closed. That’s good, Tommy thinks. Tommy is just here to survey the damage. If they can’t sort this out before he begins to rot, they’ll have to burn the body, save Wilbur from that ugly sort of return that comes from the earth trying to reclaim him and being forced to spit him back out.

Tommy knows a little too much about death, he thinks with a bitter sort of humor. He’d call himself an expert by now. Finally, a title no one can contest with *child* or *nuisance* or *bug* or *labrat* or *Dream*’s—

“I need that book,” Tommy turns back to face Technoblade and almost keels over right then, jolting back and hitting the stone wall behind him, as an eerie reflection of the face dead at his feet stands just behind Technoblade with a vacant smile.

~

Tubbo pulls away first. “I’m... I’m alright. Thanks, Ranboo,” he steps away and brushes his eyes.

“You know... it’s okay to not be alright, Tubbo. You don’t have to— I don’t want you to—” Ranboo sighs. “You can talk to me. About whatever you want.”

Tubbo exhales a bitter laugh. “Yeah... Nothing I have to say is gonna be any good to anyone.”

“Okay, what if it doesn’t have to be any good, and you just tell me?” Ranboo won’t let him get out of it so easily.

Tubbo’s arms remain folded over his chest. His anger has returned. “Fine– Fine, you wanna know what I’m thinking about?”

Ranboo nods, determined. “Yep.”

Tubbo looks like he wants to scream. Ranboo will let him. Instead, a messy ramble that Tubbo struggles to piece together, “y-you heard what– You’ve heard what Tommy has been saying, a-and it’s not right– It’s not fucking right–”

“Take a sec, man, it’s okay. What’re you trying to say?” Ranboo doesn’t know how to help.

Tubbo takes another shaky breath, trying to calm himself. “I hate that you can hear it, you know?”

“I’m sorry, Tubbo, I... I still don’t think I quite understand–”

“You can *hear* the Dream in him!” Tubbo snaps. “Tommy says these– these *horrible* things and I know *exactly* where it came from, it came from *him*,” he hisses. So much fury and nowhere to put it. “And the way Tommy talks about *Dream*! He’s fucking terrified of him, but he talks about him like-like he’s some force of nature or some god! It’s like he has more faith in Dream than he has in us– and that is *not* Tommy’s fault, I would never think that, it’s *Dream*. Always has been. It’s like he’s *still fucking here*, controlling Tommy no matter what we do to keep him away, it’s too late, because the damage is done! I-I don’t know how to *help* with something like this!” Tubbo grabs a mug off the table before he can stop himself and throws it against the wall. Its shattered pieces hit the ground. Tubbo freezes, his fury waning. Finally a loss of restraint, finally Tubbo gets to break something instead of trying to hold them all together. Tubbo is breathing hard now, staring at the broken pieces wishing they could give him more than a petty moment of catharsis.

A weighted pause. Ranboo acts first. He begins picking up the pieces. Tubbo hesitates for a moment more, almost startled by Ranboo’s calm after the storm, before joining him, mopping up the spilled coffee. “Wish I... I wish I had something to say,” Ranboo murmurs as he collects the pieces. A pause. Ranboo does have something to say, but it’s not kind exactly. “You can’t fix everything, Tubbo. Sometimes all you can do is be there to...” he exhales a soft laugh. “Pick up the pieces.”

Quiet for a time, a methodical peace found, even just for a moment, in clearing away a mess.

“Careful,” Tubbo murmurs, grabbing Ranboo’s hand gently as he moves too quickly. “You’re gonna cut yourself.”

Ranboo slows down. “I... don’t want to be the president, you know,” Ranboo stares down at the broken ceramic. Maybe the mug could be fixed, but it’s not worth the effort. “I did



once. I thought I could make things better, I thought I could help people that way, but now..." A pause, Tubbo puzzled. Ranboo doesn't need to fix a mug, but he'll stick around, he'll help Tubbo clean and he'll build a fire and he'll find *something* Tommy will eat and he'll do what he can to look after them all. "I think I... I'd rather stay with you. You and Tommy. I want to help *you*. If... if that's alright with you."

Tubbo leans against Ranboo's shoulder, exhausted, but it's like some of that weight has lifted from his chest. "Thank you, minutes man."

~

"Hello, Tommy!" Ghostbur says brightly. "What book? I have lots of books, maybe I have it!"

Technoblade swings a sword at the ghost the moment he speaks, stopping himself at the last second.

"*Dude*. You cannot sneak up on people like that," Techno laughs nervously. If Tommy didn't know better, he'd say Technoblade is on edge.

"Oh, sorry, Techno! I do live here," he says, smiling like he hasn't noticed his own corpse— is it really *his* corpse?— just around the corner. "What book do you need, Tommy?"

Tommy has a moment of frantic, pathetic hope. What're the odds that in Ghostbur's collecting habits, he might've found one of Dream's hidden revive books? "Actually, can I see your library, Ghostbur? You just might." Tommy steps past Technoblade into a room both familiar and wrong to him. He and Wilbur had tried to create some version of this place in Limbo. It's smaller than he remembers. The arm chair has a layer of dust on it, as it never has a living occupant, and the fire makes the tiny room stuffy. Tommy looks back, through the doorway into Ghostbur's brewery, just outside, Tommy can still see sunlight.

"I've missed you, Tommy!" Ghostbur claps. "Is your vacation through, then?"

Tommy tenses. "Yeah. You could say that."

*"That stupid fucking ghost could barely see it. He sort of fuzzed it all to some vacation for you."*

That monstrous hope returns. Maybe what's left of Wilbur isn't hidden away under the sewers, maybe that last link is here.

Ghostbur is intangible when he wants to be, and tangible as needed. Tommy takes a gamble and pulls the ghost into a hug. It's like hugging water, but Tommy holds on as tight as he can. "It's gonna be okay," Tommy's voice shakes. *I'm coming, Wil. I hope you're getting this, because I fucking swear I'm gonna get you out.* He tries to put those words unspoken into this single act. He doesn't even know if Wilbur can feel what Ghostbur does, or only see it. He hopes he can.

Ghostbur pats him on the back uncertainly. “Of course it’s going to be okay, Tommy. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Tommy hates that in one last thing Dream was right. He’s not *really* his brother. Maybe it’s cruel, to try and use Ghostbur as a messenger, but Wilbur can see through him, even just a little bit. So Tommy will be kind to Ghostbur even when it hurts because he wants his brother to maybe feel an echo of that warmth. He knows Wilbur can’t reply. So maybe it’s all pointless, maybe Tommy is needlessly making himself grieve his brother over and over, on the vague desperate notion that Wilbur won’t feel so alone.

*It isn’t grief. It cannot be grief because you’re getting him back.*

“Y-You should come visit some time, Ghostbur,” Tommy quickly brushes tears from his face. “At Tubbo’s place.”

“I’d like that, Tommy! It sounds fun,” Ghostbur says cheerily. “Here are all my books so far!”

Tommy knows at a glance none of the books are what he needs. None of them are stained with blood. To be sure, he asks, “have you tried opening them all, Ghostbur?”

“Have I— of *course* I have, Tommy! How else am I meant to *read* them,” Ghostbur giggles.

“Right... ‘course... well, Ghostbur, we should be getting back,” Tommy turns to Techno. There’s only so much of his brother’s echo that he can take. He doesn’t know why walking away from that sewer, he feels like he’s leaving Wilbur behind too. He knows where Wilbur is. He is in Limbo. And Tommy is going to find a way to bring him home.

They make it halfway down the prime path before Tommy collapses. Techno, startled, scrambles to catch him. Tommy doesn’t fight him, which is almost as concerning as him collapsing at all. It takes far too long for Techno’s comfort for Tommy to refocus.

“S-Sorry...” He mumbles.

“You’re— Dude. Why are you sorry? Why didn’t you—” Techno sighs. The Tommy he remembers from Pogtopia would’ve loudly complained the moment he felt tired. Tommy had been on the verge of fainting for a while now and hadn’t thought to ask Techno to even slow down. “I’m gonna carry you the rest of the way.”

“Aw,” Tommy begins to whine before stopping himself. “I was... was sick of walking anyway...” He tries not to let Techno carrying him freak him out. He knows, logically, if he asked Techno would put him down. Tommy is too weak to resist either way.

Tubbo is panicked by the sight of Techno carrying a seemingly unconscious Tommy across his threshold.

“What the fuck— What happened?” Tubbo scrambles to his feet as Techno puts Tommy down on Tubbo’s bed.

“He, uh. I think he fainted? He was talkin’ some on the walk back. Dunno if he’s awake now, though,” Techno says sheepishly. He doesn’t know why he feels responsible. This was entirely out of his control, but they had entrusted Tommy to his care. That means something.

Tubbo takes Tommy’s hand. “Tommy? You with us?”

“I’m okay,” Tommy mumbles.

“He needs to eat something,” Ranboo points out what they’ve all been thinking. “That’s why he fainted.” Techno and Tubbo turn to look at him, Ranboo shrinks under their gaze. “I mean... probably...”

“Sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry, bossman,” Tubbo reassures him quickly. “We’ll– We’re gonna figure this out. Promise.”

“Mushroom soup...”

“*What?*” Ranboo steps closer. “Mushroom soup? I thought you– Last time–”

“That was too much.”

“Too much mushroom soup?” Ranboo scoffs. He is not judging Tommy in any way, more so baffled and clueless as to how he’ll find a solution. “Huh.”

“Dream always... he always watered it down,” Tommy frowns, rubbing his eyes. His head feels heavier now. “I don’t like it anymore, but I dunno if I can eat anything else. Sorry.”

Tubbo is doing his best not to show his fury, but it just builds. Everything he learns about Dream and Tommy makes him sick. “Y-You... you don’t need to be sorry, Tommy,” Tubbo’s voice tremors, rage and hurt all tangled together still.

“You know what– Techno, can you help me?” Ranboo marches right out the front door, Techno somewhat reluctantly following.

“I saw him, Tubbo,” Tommy speaks in the moment they’re alone. “I’m gonna save him, you know.”

Tubbo forces a weak smile. “I know.” Tubbo still hates lying to Tommy.

Tubbo hears rustling in his kitchen, turning back to the tall pair stooped over his countertops. “What the hell are you two up to?”

“Makin’ soup,” Ranboo replies shortly.

“Cool... I think... I think I’m gonna take a nap,” Tommy feels like he only just woke up and like he could sleep for another week.

Tubbo hesitates. He is so scared if Tommy sleeps he won't wake back up. "You can sleep, Tommy. Of course you can, but... could you eat a golden apple for me first? Please?"

"Right, then," Tommy sighs, sitting up, shutting his eyes as the room continues to spin.

"Thank you, one- I'll be back in just a second," Tubbo quickly climbs the ladder downstairs to his storeroom, returning with a golden apple. He's almost surprised Tommy stayed awake long enough for him to return. Tommy takes the apple reluctantly, but he manages to eat it. Tubbo has a fleet thought that he hadn't really let Tommy choose for himself. Tubbo had *asked* Tommy, of course, but Tommy said yes far too easily. Tubbo doesn't have the emotional energy left to think about that. "Any better?"

"Yeah, yeah a bit," Tommy nods, closing his eyes again as even that movement makes his head pound. The golden apple cleared his head a bit, and made him wake up enough that he can stay sitting up, Tubbo sitting beside him. Within a half hour Ranboo returns with a bowl.

"Here you go, Tommy! No mushrooms. I even watered it down a little," Ranboo bounces back on his heels anxiously, as he passes Tommy the bowl of pale liquid.

"What is it?" Tommy frowns.

"Potato soup! I thought maybe I could make a rabbit stew, but then I thought the meat might be too much, so, Techno helped me get some potatoes from Tubbo's garden, and," Ranboo gestures forward. "Ta da! Soup."

Tommy gives it one more suspicious look. He shrugs, taking a swig. Tommy isn't used to soup without the taste of mushrooms. It's almost startling, but it doesn't taste especially strong either. Tommy pauses for a moment. He isn't sick. That's progress.

"Is it okay?" Ranboo asks.

"I am... not puking my guts up, so. Er. Yeah. It's okay," Tommy takes another drink. He does feel a bit nauseous already, but he's better off than he was an hour ago.

"You should probably take it slow. Eat a little bit, wait, then eat a little more," Techno offers.

"Right," Tommy takes this as invitation to set aside the bowl. He's conscious and right back to business. "Tubbo, did you find the book?"

"Yeah. I... One second," Tubbo stands, looking grim, heading back downstairs to where he keeps an enderchest. It's like the stupid thing has eyes. Nothing more than paper bound in leather, its pages stained in blood, and Tubbo feels like it's a living, breathing, evil thing. It's mocking him now, accusing him. He hadn't been able to save his best friend, but he did get the privilege of witnessing those vile happenings from the pen of the very man who enacted them. Tubbo heard what happened to Tommy *from Dream*. There's an insidious wrongness to that. These words were meant to belong to Tommy. Evil or not, it's Tommy's to do as he chooses with, so he carries it upstairs like it's something rotten.

Tommy takes the book, looking less disgusted than Tubbo, but like he also knows the weight of it. He doesn't open it just yet, merely stares at the plain leather cover. "Y'know, I've read some of it. The first bit. I read it at Logstedshire, before I ran to your place," Tommy gives Techno a nod. They still haven't talked about it. Techno hadn't felt like bringing it up on the walk to Ghostbur's, and Tommy has yet to either. One day they'll talk about it. Techno can wait. Tommy fidgets with the edge of the pages. He still doesn't read them. "I'd say he, er, dramatized things a bit," Tommy laughs nervously, that anxious smile turning somber and hollow in an instant. He's not sure if any of them believe him or not. "Not all of it, though," he says quietly. "You... I wish you'd never read it." Tommy means that, but some part of him is grateful for it too.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," it's all Tubbo can think to say.

Tommy shrugs. "They're just words, eh? What harm have words done anyone?" Tommy thinks bitterly of L'Manberg. "Maybe it would be better if words actually did something." Another moment of hesitation, Tommy opens the book.

## Chapter End Notes

this one is a bit shorter than usual, but it got to the point in the story I wanted it to be at! As I said, there won't be too much action left, unless you count painful emotional discussions as action idk.

Still, hope it was worth the read! Your comments are always so lovely. They get me writing :D

Yell at me here or at [my tumblr!](#)

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

CW ! blood and horror and mild self harm. I think I've warned for this accurately, but if someone thinks of a warning that should've been included, lmk and I'll gladly update it!

Also: the first part of this chapter includes some deliberate typos, this might make it inaccessible to screen readers and can be edited if need be. I use text to speech to read fics all the time because my vision is shit, and I could still follow things when I had it read through this chapter for me, but again, I'm happy to change it if it makes for easier reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### *The Good*

*-I'm eating again. I tried carrots again the other day wasn't sick.*

*-People want to protect me. They all want to try. and the stasis chambers in the basement make me feel better. A lot of people offered to have one set up. Sapnap, Puffy, Sam, Techno, Phil, Tubbo, Ranboo, Bad, Ant, Quackity, Eret. Just about everyone. It's setup so i can press 1 button they all come. Feels weird cause Dream was gonna keep me using one and now this keeps me safe.*

*I think i spend too much time down there though. Im scared he'll get me before i can get help so i need to stay near them. Im scared to go outside alone. It's good i can get help but it also means im stuck here. I can't leave Tubbo's house if i want help*

“That’s not *the good*, Tommy...” Tommy mutters, staring gloomily at the page. It’s true, though. He’s forced into an awful choice— does he want to be safe, or does he want to be free? Right now even feeling safe is a struggle. Maybe he should try looking at the bad stuff for a bit.

### *The Bad*

*-im having nightmares again. They're about Wilbur again. But not like before. It's bad in a different way.*

*Wil keeps on begging me to save him. When it's just limbo that's bad but sometimes it's Dream and that's worse*

Tommy doesn't want to write about that, like pulling those thoughts out of his head will make them more real. He turns back to the good.

*-Eret gave me sunglasses again but I was scared I was gonna lose them again so i said no. But when Sam came to help set up the stairs chambers he brought me goggles. They're easier to not lose because I can just keep them around my neck when I don't need them. Which is most of the time. I don't really go outside much.*

*-Ponk also gave me a cane. I don't like that it helps. It doesn't hurt so much and i can walk further. I haven't fallen yet since i got it but might be because i'm eating again too. I want to walk like normal. Ponk thinks i'm right that my leg won't get better because there's nothing to heal. The nerves are damaged.*

That's drifting into the bad again. Why is it so jumbled up all the time?

*-they let me move Wilbur closer. I mean i didn't move him i'm not strong enough but Tubbo helped. He wouldn't let me keep him in the house but he didn't bury him. He's in the side of the cliff in a bunker Tubbo has. He's in glass so i can see him and know he's still there, he's there because*

No. No, the *why* of it is bad. So he should put that on the bad list, right? He wants things to be simple. There's the good and there's the bad and if the good list is longer than the bad it means he's getting better. Why is this so *hard*?

The whole reason Tommy started doing this was because he can't fucking think straight. First it was just the decisions that made him clam up, so he started using a book to weigh his options. Now he's just trying to piece together whatever his life is now. He doesn't want to think about it, about the journaling, as something he has in common with Dream, even though he'd have to admit that had something to do with it. It comes from himself first and foremost, *not* Dream. He's always liked making plans and lists. Just because it was in the midst of rereading that awful book that he thought of it is irrelevant. Tommy hesitates, before turning back to the bad list.

*-we put Wilbur here so i can check and make sure he's still there. To make sure Dream didn't get him. I feel more sure because if Dream finds him he'll have found me too. I have to check though. After the nightmares*

*-in the nightmares i don't save Wil. Sometimes i lose him. Sometimes i go back to dream because of him.*

*-and it's not better when i'm awake. I'm thinking about how bad it would have been if they'd showed up even a few minutes later. I think about it a lot. and I start pulling on my hair if i think about what was gonna happen if they hadn't showed up at all. Or i end up scratching the floor. Whatever makes it stop. It scares Tubbo. My nails were bleeding one time when he came back.*

*He tries not to leave me. but he's helping Sapnap with looking for Dream or Quackity with L'Manberg. When he's not here it's Ranboo a lot but sometimes he forgets and shows up late. He always shows up though.*

That's good. That deserves to go on the good list. Tommy goes back a page.

*-Tubbo tries not to leave me. Ranboo always shows up even if he forgets and is late sometimes.*

*-people keep checking on me. Sam comes by and says he wants to make sure the stasis chamber is right but i know it's just because hes worried. He brought me pumpkin pie. I havent tried eating it because im worried i won't be able to. Ponk comes too. But they have a better reason. They check how sick i am still.*

*Sometimes i say things and it scares people. Last time sam and ponk came over I told Sam I wanted to be like him. I thought that was a nice thing to say. But he got all worried becus i said it all weird. Which is fair it was weird. Said I wish I could self destruct and take Dream down with me if he comes fucking near me again. Didnt mean to assume anyhting. I dont know if it even works like that. Sam dint get mad though. Just asked if he could hug me. He didnt hug me very tight thugh. Theyre all still scared of breaking me.*

*-my hair is short agian. It's much better Tubbo cut it. I got a littl scared becaus of the shears, but Tubbo was really nice about it. I didnt cry just then but i thought i was goign to. Not bad tears though i dont think. It was just different. Gentle stuff doesn't feel normal. The hugs are a little less scary becuase Wilbur hugged me, but Tubo brushed knots out of my hair. He was so careufl but it wasnt because he felt bad for me. I coud tell it was different. It was kindof like it fixed something. Something i thought broke inme a long time ago. I guess it ddint feel fixed. More like it s still broken but Tubbo took care of me anyway.*

Tommy pauses. He looks up at the bubbling pools of water around him. It's a careful design. If he were to close one trap door, they all would. Tommy had pointed out Dream could use it to summon them one at a time and kill them easily, so Sam made sure it couldn't be done one by one. It made sense, but sometimes Tommy almost wanted to use it to just bring Tubbo to him. He should talk about the bad more. Tubbo and Ranboo offer to listen.

He doesn't want to talk about it. They already don't look at him the same, he doesn't want it to get worse. It's not like there's much worse for it to get. Tommy flips back to the bad page.

*-if they hadn't showed up right then Dream was goign to cut his name into my skin. It probly would have made a scar. I dont want to think about what else he was ginna do to me.*

There he goes again. Tommy's right hand holds a quill, his left drags against the stone floor, the pain shuddering up his arm. He should stop doing that. He doesn't know why it's so hard to stop. He's eating again— why can't the rest of it get easier too?

"Tommy! I'm back!" Tubbo's voice echoes from up the ladder. Tubbo always announces himself. Tommy still flinches, holding his hand close to his chest, like he's scared he'll get in trouble for dragging his nails across the floor. He knows if anything Tubbo would just look at him, that worried gaze with a bit of rage too, but not rage towards him.

"I'm here too!" Quackity's voice follows.

Tommy should probably go upstairs and talk to them. Tommy gathers his two books, tucking them both away in his inventory. They're both equally unassuming. The only difference is



one has his blood on the pages.

“You were down there when I left,” Tubbo almost sounds disappointed when Tommy climbs up through the trap door.

“I came back up and got food,” Tommy mutters. “Hey, Big Q.”

“Hey, Tommy! How’s... how’s it going?” Quackity’s cheerfulness seems a bit forced. Same as everyone who’s come by to visit. Their efforts to treat him like normal always ring hollow.

“Oh. You know. Just... working on getting Wilbur,” Tommy isn’t sure if he’s lying or not. He hadn’t opened Dream’s journal all day. It comes and goes. Sometimes he can’t pull himself away from the thing, and other times he almost wants to burn it.

Something in Quackity’s expression changes for a moment, before his usual grin returns too fast for Tommy to try and guess what look Quackity had given him. Quackity just pushes on. “Right. Tubbo over here has been helping me take over! It’s gonna be weird– y’know? A L’Manberg cabinet without either of you.”

“We’ll still be around, Big Q,” Tubbo shrugs. “Just got... bigger things on my mind as of late.”

“Yeah, *me*, right?” Tommy scoffs.

“It’s not all about *you*, bossman,” Tubbo teases. “Right now I’ve got important plans.”

“Do you?”

“Yep. Gonna make rabbit stew to go with the pie Sam brought us,” Tubbo nods knowingly.

“Oh, right. Very important,” Tommy rolls his eyes. “Here I am, trying to solve *death*, but you’ve got some soup.”

Tubbo half nods, and his smile doesn’t fade, but he doesn’t quip back to that one.

“Is that what all that’s about, Tommy?” Quackity can’t stop himself from asking.

“What?” Tommy looks puzzled.

“Like, what you’re looking for, the stuff to get Wilbur back, d’you really think you can figure out something like that?” Quackity sounds skeptical, but he also knows what it’s like to see someone obsessed with a project to get through grief. The only thing that got Tubbo to move on was, well, Tommy. So Quackity continues without reservation. “Like, aren’t you sorta worried you’re looking for something that might not even be there?”

The look Tubbo gives him is murderous.

Tommy doesn’t get angry; somehow that’s worse. He frowns, lost in thought for a moment, staring at the ground. “I know he can be brought back. I’ve seen it. I’ve lived it and shit,

so.” Tommy looks up at the two of them, something helpless and certain behind eyes still too grey. He shrugs, but somehow he’s smiling, even if it isn’t a happy smile. “So how can I leave him?”

The silence which follows is painful, almost unbearable. “I’m sorry, Tommy, that wasn’t—that wasn’t fair of me, man. I’m sorry,” Quackity fumbles for a reply.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, Big Q,” Tommy waves him off. “Wil was the only thing keeping me together all those months— besides Dream, of course. And— And Dream was bad,” Tommy says this like somehow despite everything he’s still trying to convince himself.

Tubbo and Quackity have no idea what to say to that.

“I’m back!” Ranboo knocks before he enters, his arrival cutting the tension like a knife.

Tommy still jumps.

Ranboo looks to each of them carefully, thinking. Tommy needs to get out more. Tubbo looks an inch away from snapping. “Shoot. I forgot— you wanted me to bring back firewood,” Ranboo sighs. “Tommy, d’you want to come help me?”

Tommy stares at him. “...Right. I’d be great at that. Lifting heavy logs, want me to swing an axe too?” He says dryly.

“Oh, well, if you don’t think you can do it...” Ranboo shrugs, turning back toward the door.

“Hold on, hold on! I didn’t say *that*,” Tommy pouts. “Give me a fuckin’ second to get my coat and shit...” Tommy does so, and after a moment’s hesitation, grabs the cane from beside the door. Trekking through snow tends to hurt worse. His body aches now when he gets cold.

Ranboo and Tommy leave and a tense silence follows. Tubbo returns to his kitchen, getting out ingredients loudly. Finally, the tension breaks. “You shouldn’t have said that shit, Big Q,” Tubbo is sharp, slamming a cutting board on his counter with too much ferocity.

“What, like you aren’t thinking it? That he’s gonna obsess over Wilbur instead of getting better?” Quackity shoots back. Tubbo has no reply. There’s a moment of pause. For once Quackity doesn’t want to be right. He sighs. “So, how is he? All things considered,” Quackity nods towards the front door, where Ranboo and Tommy had just disappeared.

Tubbo frowns, focused on the cutting board in front of him. “Better, I think.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” a pause, Tubbo chopping vegetables methodically. There’s an edge to his voice; that always seems to happen when he talks about Tommy now. “Not better enough.”

Quackity nods grimly. “Yeah. I mean, that makes sense.”

“Does it?” Tubbo’s voice grows high and sharp. “He doesn’t leave that fucking basement and he doesn’t stop looking at that fucking book. I– I dunno if taking him out here into the snow was a good idea, but I thought at least here he’d be *safe*, but he’s– He acts like he’s still a fucking prisoner! And I’m supposed to be the one making things *better*.”

“Come on,” Quackity shifts uncomfortably. “You can’t mean that, he’s just– He’s nervous, understandably, right–?”

Tubbo stops his chopping, his shaky hands too close to drawing blood. He turns to face Quackity sharply, a storm still brewing behind his eyes. There’s always too much stirring under the surface with Tubbo, and it always breaks free with little warning. “You wanna know what he said to me the other day, Big Q?”

Quackity stares, dread growing louder in the back of his head, but how can he not ask? “What?”

“S-So, I come home, and he hasn’t moved from that fucking basement, so I– I ask him!” Tubbo gestures aggressively towards the snowy windows. “I asked him if he’d gone outside that day, or if he’d gotten something to eat– or– or *something*– and h-he gives me this *look*, this surprised fucking *look*, and goes ‘oh, I forgot you’d let me leave.’ *Let him?! Fucking let him?!’* Tubbo laughs and it sounds almost like a threat. Tubbo wants to hurt something, but his ideal target is currently fucking MIA. “Does that *sound* like nerves?! Or does that sound like someone who doesn’t– who can’t–” Tubbo takes a shaky breath. He needs to stop shouting before Tommy hears him. “H-He *always* expects doors to be locked, okay? And that’s–” Tubbo’s voice is shaking from more than anger now. “That’s not *better*, Big Q.”

Quackity seems to come to some decision, nodding resolutely. “You don’t have to help me with L’Manberg stuff anymore, Tubbo. I’ve got it. Sapnap is still working his ass off trying to find Dream. You should be here, with him. I know you want to be. The rest of us... we’ll cope without you, okay?”

Tubbo scoffs. “Huh. I’m glad you think I can help him, Big Q. But I dunno how Tommy is going to get better when the very man he’s having nightmares about is still out there.”

“We’ll get him,” Quackity sounds utterly sure. “However long it takes, we’re hunting that man down and we’re tearing him apart.”

“Well, don’t be too hasty, Tommy wants him back *alive*,” Tubbo shivers. “For Wilbur’s sake.” He glances in the direction of the bunker. “The nightmares are still bad. I’m not as worried about him freaking out and getting himself hurt, but it’s not gone away. I know he still has them. I hear him getting up and going to the bunker.”

“Yeah,” Quackity follows his gaze, unable to hide his disgust. “It’s fucking weird how much he visits that body. We should’ve buried it.”

Tubbo, for all his own irritation, gets defensive. “It’s not like he’s hugging it. He’s just checking to make sure it’s there. It comforts him. What were we supposed to do, just say *no*? ‘Sorry, Tommy, you’ll just have to trust that he’s still there every time you have a nightmare’? He’d probably end up running halfway across the server in the middle of the

night, *alone*, and that's not an option. Nah, what's *really* weird is Wilbur being the one who protected him apparently. Where did *that* come from? Tommy was learning to live without him before all this bullshit happened, after how he screwed us over, we all were..."

Quackity seems to find this part more reasonable than the corpse in the walls. "Hey, they were foxhole buddies. You remember what that was like, back in Manberg. We had to put up with the same shit, *some* of the same shit, anyway," Quackity pauses for a moment. He fleetingly has the thought he should ask Tommy about Schlatt. If he'd seen Wilbur, then... No. Not something worth pursuing. He refuses to let it be. "And I fucked up then, too. But I mean, look at us now. I was an asshole, and now I'm your Vice President!" Quackity grins, nudging him teasingly.

"Not my VP *anymore*, Quackity," Tubbo smiles cheekily. "You *were* a bit of an asshole."

"Hey! I got better!" Quackity pretends to pout. The moment calms. "But, yeah, you heard him. If Wilbur was all he had to hold onto... It makes sense. Him wanting him back."

Tubbo hums a noncommittal reply. Wilbur just feels like one more thing Tubbo needs to protect Tommy from.

~

*"Wake up."*

*There's a white mask above him. Tommy can't move. It's the familiar pain of being paralyzed.*

*"It's time to come home, Tommy. You've had your fun. Now it's time for you to come back," Dream ruffles his hair and there's nothing Tommy can do to stop him.*

*"No— No, fuck you! S-Stay away from me!" Tommy cannot move, but he can scream.*

*No one comes. Not Tubbo, not Ranboo, not anyone. He doesn't know where he is. It's dark. It's not Limbo, though, because Dream is here.*

*Dream shakes his head, tutting him. "Would you look at that. You've been away for, what, a few weeks and already you've lost your manners! I worked so hard to teach you those. I can teach you again, you know."*

*Tommy is sitting up. He can't remember moving. Dream crouches down so they're eye to eye, or eye to mask, rather.*

*"I have someone who's gonna help me with that, you know. Someone I think you really miss," Dream's voice rings with mocking pity.*

*"I'm gonna kill you— I'll f-fucking kill you again, you bitch, don't fucking touch him—" Tommy knows he sounds terrified.*

*"Tommy, please! Tommy— make him stop! P-Please do whatever he says just make him stop!" Wilbur is screaming, screaming like he's close by. Tommy can't see him.*

*“Wil?! Wil– if you can hear me–”*

*“Tommy, it hurts! Please, Tommy! Don’t leave me alone with him!” Wilbur is crying. Tommy always gets scared when his brother cries.*

(This is wrong. It’s all wrong. Wilbur would never tell Tommy to give himself up.)

*“Hear that, Tommy?” Dream whispers too close. “He wants you to come home too. You miss him, don’t you?”*

(This is a nightmare. This isn’t real. So why does it still hurt?)

*“Oh, I see. You don’t care,” Dream continues, scolding and cruel. “You should tell that to his face, you know. You should tell him you don’t care.”*

*Tommy wants to scream, but he can’t make a sound as his brother’s bloody face is dragged from the darkness. Wilbur is coughing up blood, it’s dripping from his eyes, so much blood pouring out from inside of him, a flood, the blood fresh and hot and its metallic scent far too real. He’s reaching towards him, desperate, clawing hands, and then Wilbur is on the ground. He cannot remain standing as blood pours from his ears, from his mouth, from his eyes, beading up from his very pores until he is nothing but red. Tommy still cannot move. Even as Wilbur writhes on the ground like a man possessed, and despite the blood in his mouth, Tommy can still hear him screaming–*

Tommy doesn’t scream when he wakes up. Instead he feels like he’s choking. He’s tangled in the blankets, struggling to get free.

Finally he hits the cold wooden floor, gasping for breath, finally getting his bearings on reality.

He is in Tubbo’s home. He’s safe. Safe-ish.

That one was bad. Not the worst, but as far as nightmares go, far from easy. Ponk has offered potions to help Tommy sleep. He hasn’t accepted them. He’s scared he won’t be able to wake up when he needs to. It doesn’t make his nightmares any more bearable.

It takes a few more minutes for Tommy’s racing heart to slow. He stands, looking towards Tubbo’s bed on the other side of the room. He hasn’t stirred. Good. Tommy treads carefully, an act he is well practiced in, and puts on his boots. He grabs the cane from beside the wall, and after a moment of hesitation, he grabs a book he keeps tucked carefully under his mattress.

The cold air clears his head, and despite having a destination in mind, he stops to just look up. He still hasn’t gotten used to seeing the stars again. He could keep watching them. Just to be sure they were going to stay there.

No, he won’t be able to rest until he sees this through.

Tommy goes to the bunker under the hill. His left hand has his cane, which he leans more heavily on going down the steps. The bunker has two floors, Tommy can see into the lower

one through the gaps in the floor. He looks down just to be sure he's alone. Wilbur is to the right, laid gently in a gap cut into the wall just for him, a sheet of glass keeping him from the rest of the room and rot. He looks like he could be sleeping now. He's covered by the same L'Manberg flag they had buried Tommy with. Except for his face. Tommy had needed to be able to see his face.

Tommy stares at him for a moment, right hand pressed to the already smudged glass. "Hey, Wil," he says it softly, a familiar greeting. He sighs. "You're still here..."

He wishes that relief were enough. It's not. Tommy doubts he'll be able to sleep again tonight. Tommy slowly leans against the wall beside Wilbur's tomb, sliding to the ground. He reaches for his book. It's the one with blood on its pages.

Tommy opens it. He feels sick; not for the gore and violence lovingly described on its pages— although, that kind of horror is no stranger to him— but by just a few lines, a simple side note without flourish or fanaticism, not of any particular note to someone else, but to Tommy they're so cruel it almost hurts.

*"I've gotten distracted. I started running out of copies. Had to leave Tommy in lockup for a while to make more. It's stupid. He got to rest while I did the dirty work. Maybe I'll teach him. Enough that he can do most of it. Not like he'll ever have the opportunity to use it."*

*Maybe I'll teach him.*

*Maybe I'll teach him.*

*Maybe I'll teach him.*

Tommy had never imagined there would be a moment where he *regretted* the timing of his rescue. And yet, here he is. He can't help but think: how much longer he would he have had to suffer? How much longer would he have had to put off rescue? How many days, how many deaths, how much *pain*, had been between Tommy and learning how to save his brother?

## Chapter End Notes

I took some inspiration from this beautiful and heartbreaking [Rozugold comic](#).

Also. Writing like Tommy was so hard. I can copy that kid's voice no problem, but honestly no amount of typos felt like enough lol. I reread his letters to Ranboo during exile, and whew! they were really something.

this one is a little shorter than usual, and ehh not my best work, but I felt bad for keeping you guys waiting! My life has gotten batshit crazy the past few weeks and I haven't had the time or emotional capacity for writing lol.

But as always, thank you all for your thoughts and art and everything!! It's so cool to see  
:D

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Notes

CW: more of Dream's journal, so discussion of rot, dismemberment, dehumanization, torture. ya know. Mild self harm, less mild self loathing.

The usual.

This chapter is a long one but I had so many things planned I wanted to get to, so. Hope 10,000 words make up for the longer wait lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy returns at dawn. Tubbo is already awake. He doesn't seem surprised to see Tommy returning from outside, just grim and tired.

"You can wake me up, you know," Tubbo continues to poke the stirring fire. "I'd go with you."

"Nah, no point. You know how it is. Just had to check," Tommy shrugs.

Tubbo stares at the book in Tommy's hands with something worse than contempt. Tommy puts it back in his inventory almost defensively.

"You left your comm."

"I know."

Maybe it's just too early in the morning for conversation, maybe there just isn't much to say, but they both feel it. Both of them know this silence is just another part of how much has changed.

Tubbo sighs. "You should try and get used to carrying it again. It's important, if you need help, or..."

"Yeah," Tommy says shortly. He's not used to it. He doesn't know how to *get* used to it. He doesn't even remember when he lost his original comm. Not like he had anyone to reach out to in exile, and then suddenly it was just gone. It had taken a pathetically long amount of time— it had taken Tubbo all but spelling it out for him— for him to realize that he probably hadn't even lost it. Dream could've taken it from him at any time. Not like it matters, no matter how it had happened, it's been months, maybe years, counting time dead, since Tommy had a communicator.

Tubbo sighs, getting to his feet. "Breakfast?"



“I’m good. Not hungry.”

“Yeah, you’re *never* hungry,” Tubbo says exasperatedly. “Can’t you just eat some toast?”

Tommy sits at the dining table, already itching to get that book back out. “Fine,” he mutters.

Tubbo tries not to think about how Tommy caves too easily. That bitter dichotomy between him trying to stop Tommy from neglecting himself and the disturbing nature of Tommy doing whatever he says.

“Was the nightmare bad?” Is what Tubbo asks instead.

“Barely. Pretty usual,” is all Tommy says.

Tubbo nods. “Anything I can do?”

“No.”

Tubbo nods again. He hates this. He just wants to *fix* things. “You know, why don’t you sleep with a knife under your pillow? Or a sword, I suppose, but a knife helps because you can hide it. That always made me feel better when I was staying in Manberg.”

Tommy shakes his head quickly. “No. No— I can’t do that,” he shudders.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Nothin’ you did, man, just. Last time I hid from Dream with a knife I lost a finger,” Tommy laughs dryly.

“You—” Tubbo turns back to look at him, eyes wide. “Right.” Tubbo clearly wants to ask for more information, but he just turns back to his kitchen. The puzzle pieces of Tommy’s reality over the past months come together slowly but no less painfully.

Tommy takes his silence as permission to get the book back out. Tommy has folded down some of the pages. He’s proud of that. He could even write in Dream’s book if he wanted. That feels too brave right now. He turns to somewhere in the middle. He’s been fixating on different pages. The ones that infect him the worst aren’t Dream obsessing over violence, it’s always the little things.

*“Wilbur has been handled.”*

Infuriating.

Not to say the violence isn’t unsettling. He flips to a bad page. Tommy almost wants to tear out the ones about his resurrection after he was left to rot.

*“Something had been eating him for sure, but whatever they ate grew back. I know because some of him I had to leave outside. Interesting. Still raises questions about severing a limb.”*

Tommy quickly turns to the next page. *You got your answer, didn't you, you sick son of a bitch?* Tommy doesn't like knowing that something had been eating him. That part makes his skin crawl almost as much as Dream making *plans* for fucking up his head even more, *obedience training* and all that. No wonder he isn't hungry. He doesn't want to think about the fact that Tubbo has read this as well; that irritating voice in the back of his head telling him *well now Tubbo basically has a guidebook for how to control you, huh?*

Tommy skims for more mentions of Wilbur.

*"But he's angry with Wilbur, which was partially the goal. I can work with this. He's so lonely it's fascinating. I guess it makes sense. A teenager probably has more delicate emotional needs or whatever to keep the chemicals right in his brain. He asked for Ghostbur. Don't really know why, but I can use it either way. He was willing to let someone— or I guess since it's Ghostbur, something, get hurt just to make himself less miserable. That's a change to how Tommy treated his attachments before. Establishing even greater dependency will be easy. Also helpful: if I ever let him and Wilbur see each other, Wilbur is going to be the golden ticket. Ghosts remain a blank space in my records. Maybe I'll capture Ghostbur, run some tests on him and Wilbur."*

Tommy shivers. There's too much there to be unsettled by. It all starts to blur together. Tommy can't really remember things clearly anymore. He can't remember why he asked for Ghostbur. He regrets it. He doesn't like thinking Dream was right. That maybe Dream had changed him enough that he didn't care about people as much as he used to. He doesn't know. Maybe this doesn't mean anything.

"Toast," Tubbo slides a plate across the table, interrupting his spiral. "Is no reading during breakfast a fair rule?" Tubbo frowns at that book like a disapproving parent.

"Right..." Tommy puts it away, staring at the bread dully. He *really* doesn't have an appetite now. He'll eat anyway. Tubbo asked.

"I'm here!" Ranboo knocks and announces himself through the door like always.

"Just in time for food, of course, did you time that?" Tubbo pretends to scold him.

"Uh. No, but I'll take breakfast," Ranboo says, shaking snow out of his hair. "Tommy, d'you want to maybe hang out in the mainlands today? Me and Tubbo don't have any plans, so, the three of us could... I dunno, find trouble? Isn't that usually how it goes?" Ranboo teases him lightly.

Tommy inexorably thinks of a house on fire. He just shrugs.

Ranboo wilts. "Well, if you wanna some time, we can..." he murmurs, glancing to Tubbo for some indication of how to proceed.

"I am done with this toast now, Tubso," Tommy slides the plate back towards his friend, relocating to a spot on the floor by the fire.

Tubbo stares at the half a slice of bread left over. Tubbo looks towards Tommy, unsure of what he's even planning on saying, until he sees that awful book open in his lap. Something so small shouldn't make him so irritated. He doesn't say anything. The silence drags on, Ranboo accepting food gratefully, if only to have something to do.

"Maybe we could go to L'Manberg. See how everyone is getting on without us," Tubbo says. He's going to get Tommy out of this house, whatever it takes.

"Yeah. We could do that," Tommy says disinterestedly.

"Aren't you sick of being up here in the snow?" Tubbo pushes.

"What?" Tommy blinks, finally looking up from that book. "I mean. I guess. I'm sort of used to not having any windows. Don't really care what's out of them."

"What do you *mean* you don't care?" Tubbo grows sharp against his bidding. Tommy stares at him with wide eyes. A painful pause. "I meant— like—" Tubbo sighs, pushing back his hair. "I meant... don't you *want* to be outside again?"

"Er. Yeah. Not safe, though, is it?" Tommy replies dully.

Tubbo stares at him incredulously. Tommy, worried about *safety*. He understands why, *logically*, but it doesn't make it feel any less wrong. Tommy *always* wants to do something. There's never been a time he hasn't looked for a project or a person to occupy himself with. He's never known Tommy to be *passive*. Tubbo doesn't want to think about what this means, the dreaded thought that maybe Tommy has changed in ways that Tubbo cannot fully reckon with. Tommy is free, but he's wasting away at the same time and Tubbo does *not* want to think about how this is because of Wilbur. Even in the initial grief, Tommy had kept busy, that had meant something. Whatever has changed, whatever Tommy is now, it's not *grief*. It's the opposite, in fact. Tommy is fucking *stuck* because he's waiting for his dead brother to come home, because he *knows* that's an option. Tubbo can't blame him. The moment he knew there was a chance to get Tommy back, nothing else mattered.

"Guess I should... see the server. See what's changed," Tommy speaks up, looking at Tubbo carefully, gauging for a reaction, or more like he's looking for approval, like every word Tommy says means nothing to him except for whether or not it will make Tubbo happy.

Tubbo hates it. He doesn't want Tommy to treat him like he's Dream.

"Cool. Uh. Tubbo, we could show him the apiary?" Ranboo speaks up.

"Yeah, the fuck actually *is* an apiary?"

An apiary, Tommy would soon find, was a glass dome full of bees. A Tubbo paradise. Tommy squints, lifting his goggles as the glass above dulls the sunlight outside. "It's loud, innit?"

"Yeah, I like it, though. The buzzing helps me think. Stops me from hearing like ringing in my ears and stuff," Tubbo shrugs. He'd spent so many hours sitting here trying not to think

about how he'd lost Tommy, and now here he is, showing it to him. It makes him almost feel giddy.

"Right. When did you all build this, then?" Tommy stares at the walls. The wood isn't aged, but it's not *new* anymore. That almost scares him. What's new to him isn't even new anymore. He's not *out of time* as in running out of time, if Dream had taught him anything, it's he's *drowning* in time, but he's *out of time* as in he does not belong here. He is not a creature of the present nor the future, he can't even say he's a part of the past because whatever version of himself is back there isn't *him* anymore; he's something that was never supposed to come back. How can he not see that written in the layer of dirt on the wooden walls of the apiary? The layer of pollen misting the glass enough that he doesn't need anything else to shade him from the sun?

"I dunno," Tubbo looks to Ranboo before he realizes he's the worst person to ask. "A while ago. Before... Well, before you died," is the only way Tubbo can think to say it.

"And how long after I was exiled?" The question slips out before Tommy can stop himself. How long did it take for them to just decide to keep living without him?

Tubbo understands. Immediately, he understands, because he can't pretend his every action in the aftermath of Tommy leaving— of Tommy being sent away, of Tommy being *taken*— hadn't been shadowed by that loss.

"I dunno, Tommy. Things were sort of blurry in the start. After you..." Tubbo doesn't know which one to say. *Leaving, sent away, taken.*

"Right," Tommy can't help but think Tubbo is only trying to make him feel better. *Blurry. Sure. Not blurry enough you thought to check on me, eh?*

Before anyone can think of a single reply to cut the tension, Tommy feels something crawling across his skin, and suddenly nothing else matters. Tommy hits the wall behind him with a bang, scratching at his arm where he had felt it, the bee having fled the moment he jerked away.

"No no no *no no no no get off— f-fucking get off—*" Tommy stammers. There's nothing there anymore and still he scratches at his arm.

"Tommy! *Tommy*, stop!" Tubbo feels his own jolt of panic, grabbing Tommy's wrist to stop him from scratching at his skin as he sees it start to tear.

"*Let go!*" Tommy screams at him, without anger, instead only frantic terror.

Tubbo jumps back, hands raised passively. Tommy remains pressed to the wall, holding the arm Tubbo had grabbed defensively close to his chest, glancing from Tubbo to Ranboo with wide eyes, waiting for one of them to try to come closer. He looks behind Ranboo to the door.

"I-I want to leave," Tommy tries to force some strength into his tone, even as his voice still shakes.

Ranboo quickly steps back so he has a clear path to the door. Tommy still doesn't move, staring at both of them. Tubbo has no idea what to do and Ranboo doesn't seem to know either.

"Y-You can go, Tommy," Ranboo tries.

Tommy shakes his head. "No. No, for some fuckin' reason I can't, so, you two first."

"Okay, okay we can do that," Ranboo looks to Tubbo quickly, heading toward the doors. At first Tubbo doesn't move, he just stares at Tommy, pale with worry and guilt. Ranboo grabs his hand and pulls him gently towards the doorway.

Only once they leave does Tommy follow. He walks right past them in the opposite direction, toward the lake next to the new camarvan. He takes a deep breath, still closed off, arms folded over his chest protectively. He feels like he's about to be sick. He could *smell it*. In an instant he could *smell* the fucking rot. He gags over the water, shuddering.

"You okay, Tommy?" Tubbo asks, the answer being obvious, but he still has to say it.

"My skin is all tingly and shit," Tommy says shortly. He's not going to be sick at least. Another shaky breath. "D-Didn't like- Don't fucking grab me, Tubbo- What the fuck is wrong with you?!" He snaps. It was quite the one-two punch, the scent of rot awoken by a bee crawling on him, and someone grabbing his arm to stop him from moving.

"I-I'm sorry. You were- You were hurting yourself, man," Tubbo says helplessly. He keeps a good two meters between them and Tommy makes no move to close the gap.

"But- But y-you don't just fuckin' *grab* someone like that!" Tommy's voice breaks; he knows it's a feeble excuse, but what else is he meant to do? "Y-You don't *do* that!"

"I know," Tubbo concedes immediately. "I didn't think about it. I just saw you starting to hurt yourself and reacted. I could've handled that better."

Tubbo's mature response only makes Tommy feel more bitter. It's too generous, it's too rational and too irrational all at once- the *normal fucking response* to someone clawing at their own skin is to fucking *stop them*. Tommy doesn't know who he's angry with. "Sure," he scoffs. "Right, you should've known better than to do something when I started freaking out, eh? That's not fair."

Tubbo has no reply now. He doesn't know what Tommy wants.

"What happened, Tommy?" Ranboo speaks up instead.

Tommy glances to him warily. "Something... something was crawling on me," he mutters. "A-A bee fucking landed on me..."

Tubbo opens his mouth to speak but no words come. That was not the answer he was expecting. *That* was what set Tommy off? Tommy can see the bafflement in Tubbo's eyes.

“I don’t like bugs. I don’t like shit crawling on me,” Tommy says half under his breath. He shivers. He doesn’t know why he feels ashamed all the sudden.

Tubbo hates that his first thought is if there’s going to be anything left of Tommy unchanged.

“It’s for...” Tommy swallows thickly. “It’s for bad reasons, so don’t fuckin’ ask me about it, okay?”

“Alright, Tommy. We won’t,” Ranboo says quickly.

Tommy nods, staring down at the water. “What now?”

Tubbo fumbles for something to give. “Do you want to see more of L’Manberg? I don’t think too much has changed, but we could go around and look,” Tubbo offers.

Tommy shakes his head. A moment of silence, Tommy thinking. “The— The bench. Can we go to the bench?”

Tubbo feels an ache in his chest. “Yeah. Sure.”

They make it almost to the prime path when Tommy stops. “Those’re... those’re a lot of stairs,” he mutters. “I left the— the stick in the bee thing.”

“You... what?” Ranboo has a hard time following.

“The cane. I’ll get it, Tommy,” Tubbo understood, heading back towards the apiary.

“Oh. You could always lean on me, if you want, Tommy,” Ranboo offers.

Tommy stares at the ground. He shakes his head. “Thanks but no thanks,” he says coldly, thinly veiled rage rising too easily. “I can do shit on my own.”

Maybe there’s something wrong in Tubbo and Ranboo both thinking that Tommy being meaner means he’s getting better. At least he’s not cowering and waiting for them to hit him anymore. Most of the time, at least.

Tommy manages the stairs fine once he has the cane. He doesn’t manage to ignore the irritating thought that he once could’ve sprinted up those stairs without problem. Tommy doesn’t want to think that he might never run again without it hurting him.

He makes it to the bench in one piece and he does feel a moment of relief when sitting beside Tubbo feels natural. That’s one thing left untouched, sitting beside Tubbo still feels like where he belongs.

“Don’t just stand there, Ranboo, there’s room,” Tommy sees Ranboo standing uncertainly beside them. Ranboo takes a spot beside Tubbo.

“Wait— I have mellohi!” Tubbo says excitedly. “One second, I can—” Tubbo pauses when Tommy doesn’t match his enthusiasm. “Or, maybe we should listen to something else?”

Tommy gives him a funny sort of look Tubbo can't quite read. Tubbo almost thinks he looks nervous, or guilty, or even *scared*.

"Tommy?" Tubbo says it like a question, like Tommy's silence denotes an answer.

Tommy doesn't know what to do. To tell Tubbo they *can't* listen to a disc? A ritual as old as the discs themselves? The very thought feels so much wronger than anything else he's struggled with since being back, but the truth of it is Tommy is scared if they start listening to a disc he won't be able to stop. This keeps happening. Tommy feels like he's going to start drowning in all the things he doesn't know how to explain to the people he cares about.

He's tired of drowning.

"Can I... Before we do that," Tommy starts slowly. "Can I tell you guys some stuff?"

"Of course, Tommy," Tubbo says earnestly. Ranboo nods beside him.

"Okay. Because... er. It's not *good*."

"That's okay, man. Whatever it is," Ranboo glances to Tubbo. "We'll get through it. We're here to listen."

"Okay," Tommy nods. He stares over the cliffside. He can see his open grave from here. "I haven't told you what it was like. What—" Tommy feels like sharing this is something forbidden. Dream always grilled him for any information about limbo, and now Tommy can keep every bitter word of it hidden deep. But... Tommy looks to his right, where Tubbo and Ranboo stare back, open and waiting and unafraid of whatever Tommy has to give, without insistence or demand, just a willingness to be there. He wants this to be a choice. That was the main thing Dream had stolen from him. So now he is going to choose to give this to them, even if it scares him.

"I'm gonna tell you what it's like to be dead," Tommy struggles to get the words out, staring at the two of them for some response of horror or perhaps worse, *interest*. Ranboo has a moment of worry and Tubbo a moment of surprise, but they both get over their own feelings with grace, Tubbo giving a quick nod and Ranboo following suit. Nothing else said. No questions raised, no horror or fascination, they just wait for him to make the next move. Tommy doesn't know why that makes his chest ache with longing. It can't be longing to be listened to, because he *has* that now. He doesn't know what it is. It can't be a longing for understanding. He doesn't want anyone to understand what this was like. No one deserved that pain.

Still, they wait. Ranboo and Tubbo wait and they don't look scared. This is the part where he's meant to tell them that there's nothing after this. This is the part where he breaks them both, where he renders it all futile because there is no life after death, but it's not *nothing* either. Nothing would mean rest. It would mean this ends. It's as close to nothing as they can get and that makes it worse. This is the part where he takes away something he isn't even sure if they know they have. But he doesn't know how he can keep this trapped inside of himself either.

“You die, and you go somewhere else. It’s not... I wouldn’t call it some afterlife. It’s... it’s limbo. For Wilbur, it was... it was like some train station. Dunno why. And for me...” Tommy shivers. He feels the sun warm on his skin. The sky above him is overcast, but tangible. He can smell the grass, he can smell things that remind him he’s alive. Not rotting. “It was just black. It was just *black*. Infinite around me. No sky or floor or anything tangible, really. There was nothing. Couldn’t... couldn’t feel anything except... except like I was falling and getting pulled apart or some shit. I mean, I figured out how to get a floor eventually but...” Tommy trails off. He doesn’t know how to explain something like this. He never thought there’d come a point where he wished for one of Dream’s demanding questions. “Dream killed me,” he says it and feels like a broken record, with a glance to the jukebox taunting him in the corner of his eye, he thinks that metaphor might be a bit too apt. He doesn’t look back at them. He returns to staring over the cliffside, at a world that had kept on turning without him. “And he left me dead for a long time.”

Tommy starts dragging his nails against the wood of the bench, the familiar pain shuddering through his hand. Tubbo spots it immediately. He doesn’t scold him, nor pull his hand away, he just holds it, giving it a gentle squeeze. Tommy stops, letting Tubbo keep him steady instead of the pain.

Tommy is struck by how little they actually know. If he wants them to know this, he’ll have to *tell* them all of it. Although, they know as much as Dream does, he supposes. He doesn’t like that. He’ll tell them it all again. He’ll tell them it again because it is *his* to share. It doesn’t belong to Dream. “See, time works funny over there. It stretches and stretches until it’s all loose and... and it just keeps going,” he fumbles for a way to explain. “Dream says I was dead for nine days— this time, this was the longest I was dead, I was dead for a while before, like, six days the other long time I think, but that time I had Wil, *this* time, though—” he stops to take a deep breath, rambling until he runs out of air. “I was alone. Dream took him away from me. I didn’t know that then, I didn’t even know he was gonna leave me dead for so long, it j-just—” A shaky inhale. “It just kept *going*, man. It just kept fucking going and I thought I was gonna be there forever,” Tommy feels like he’s about to scream, he feels this pain rising in the back of his throat. He just takes another deep breath, it’s more a whimper. He barely speaks above a whisper now, he doesn’t know if he wants to be heard. “Do I tell you all of it?” Finally, he looks back at them, his eyes wide and pale and his hands are shaking and he feels like his whole body is filled with static, like if he doesn’t let some of this out of him he’s going to get torn apart. Just like in Limbo.

Tubbo and Ranboo almost don’t know what to do with such a question. *Do I tell you all of it?* It’s not *can* he tell them all of it, nor is it *should*, it’s something else entirely. Tubbo doesn’t want to think Tommy is still looking for orders, but it’s not even that. Tommy just doesn’t know what to do.

“What if you just tell us what you need to?” Ranboo murmurs softly. It’s a kind answer. Tommy will hold onto it.

“Okay. Well. Er,” Tommy tries to think. He looks at the jukebox again. “You can get stuff. When you’re dead, if you want something bad enough, it just sort of *appears*. S-So when I was alone for all that time, I got myself a jukebox, and a disc,” he looks back at Tubbo with wide, frantic eyes. “It wasn’t a disc you’ve ever seen before, Tubso, it was something new.



It was called *Otherside*. I don't fucking know where it came from, I mean, it can't have come from *me*, eh? But it came from somewhere and it was there and it was *so fucking beautiful*, Tubbo. I cannot describe to you," Tommy holds Tubbo's hand so tightly it almost hurts them both. "It was— I just c-can't," Tommy's voice shakes, a lump in his throat, tears rising at the very thought. "T-The point is, I held onto it. To the disc. And it kept me together for some of those months— and helped me fall apart other times, I guess, but I needed it. See? So I can't listen to a disc now, Tubbo, and I am *so so* scared I'll never be able to again, but right now I just can't, okay?"

Now Tubbo has a reply, he grows puzzled. "I'm not sure I understand, Tommy. I think I follow the rest of it, but why can't you listen to a disc now?"

"Because I won't be able to stop," Tommy says earnestly. "A-And I don't know what will happen to me then, because in Limbo I could just keep going and keep listening until it broke my brain but here I can't listen forever and—" he squeezes Tubbo's hand, leaning in close, something wild behind those pale, grey eyes. "*I don't know how to stop*. I don't know how to stop, Tubbo and I am so scared to start even though I want it. I want it so bad it *hurts*," he says hoarsely.

Tubbo realizes now as Tommy leans in close that he's crying, silent tears spilling over unacknowledged. Tubbo doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know if Tommy is sad or scared or what, but he's crying all the same.

"Okay, Tommy," Tubbo forces him to speak as the silence stretches on, Tommy clearly waiting for a reply. "You can listen to them whenever you're ready."

Tommy leans back, brow furrowed. He looks disappointed by Tubbo's reply, not that Tommy has any clue what he was hoping for either. Because he's scared he's broken it for himself forever. He won't be able to bring himself to give into temptation and play a disc, because he's scared of that pull, but that means he's never going to hear music again, doesn't it? Tommy just nods. He knows Tubbo is staring at him. He knows everyone is just waiting for him to be himself again, to be normal again, but Tommy also feels confident they don't *really* want the Tommy he was before. That version of himself was the one who made this mess in the first place.

"I'm really scared, Tubbo," Tommy whispers it shakily.

"Tommy?"

"I want to try. I want to try and listen to a disc so badly, but I'm scared too. I don't know what to do," Tommy stares at the grass at his feet. Every blade feels almost too clear. The details of the world are still startling. It's cloudy. Tommy keeps the goggles around his neck.

"Okay, Tommy. What if... what if we play it. We can play it over and over, if you want. And what if when you're ready, you take the jukebox. And you have it with you, alright?" Tubbo wants to give Tommy a plan.

Tommy turns to the enderchest beside the bench. He hasn't looked inside it since coming back. Some gold and diamonds, some old books with memories attached, and a few discs.

He has Blocks. It's a disc older than exile, a disc from better times, however bittersweet they may feel now, but it's something.

He can play Blocks. He can do this. He feels Tubbo beside him. It won't be like last time. No one is going to try and take this away from him. He puts it in the jukebox. He stares, frozen for a moment, almost expecting it to not work, all he can hear is his heart fluttering against the inside of his chest, and then those gentle notes rise and Tommy feels the tension drain away, mingling with a relief that feels almost dangerous. He doesn't want to think about how scared he is. He just wants to listen. He leans back against the bench, resting on Tubbo's shoulder. Tubbo puts his arm around him.

When it ends, Tommy plays it again. He plays it again. And no one tries to take it from him. At some point, that fear fades. He doesn't feel like he isn't supposed to be here, alive and with people who love him, he just listens. When the sun begins to set, Tommy lets it play one more time, he feels Tubbo beside him and knows he's watching the sunset too, the sun finally moving below the cloud cover and the sky is on fire, a shock of orange and pink and red softening the line of the horizon. Tommy squints, but he doesn't stop watching. He had missed the way the world changes. The disc stops, and Tommy searches for that pang of panic he had felt every other time, expecting something to break. Tommy doesn't feel it. He feels a peace rooted deeply inside of him. And then he stops. He holds the disc for a moment, wavering on some precipice, but he doesn't keep playing it. It doesn't break him. Tommy puts it back in his enderchest, and puts the jukebox in his inventory. He can't pretend the fear is gone, like he isn't still dreading the potential for an endless spiral, but in this moment he's okay. He had listened to a disc. Dream didn't steal this from him, or if he did, Tommy got it back. He's changed, and he knows some things he won't ever be able to return to, but not everything. He's alive. He can listen to a disc and watch the sunset with his friends beside him. Tommy hadn't thought he'd ever come home like this, that he still had this kind of peace left inside of him, but he's here. Despite everything, he's still here.

~

*"He showed, The god showed and brought him back."*

Tommy rereads it again, like somehow those words burned onto his eyelids will make them make more sense. Tommy has circled those words with blue ink. He's quite proud of that. He's marked up Dream's journal because it isn't *his* anymore.

*"The god showed and brought him back."*

Tommy flips a few pages ahead, the only other point where the god is mentioned.

*"The god stopped showing up early on, but Tommy gets brought back either way so it doesn't matter."*

He doesn't understand it, but he thinks it's important.

"Hey, Tommy," Ranboo announces his arrival, brushing away snow before it has time to melt. He hesitates as he sees Tommy's current line of work. "Still, uh. You're still reading that, huh?" He says dully.

Tommy hums a absentminded reply. “Wait, actually, Ranboo— He mentions you.”

“What?” Ranboo’s panic is immediate. “No— he can’t have, I read it,” Ranboo kneels down beside him.

“Did you read all of it?” Tommy asks dully.

“Well, no, it got too—” Ranboo doesn’t know how to say *it got too upsetting* to the person who lived it. “Puffy tried to finish it. She stopped.”

“Puffy?” Tommy processes that carefully. “You read it, Puffy read it,” Tommy remembers the look in Tubbo’s eyes when he had asked about the book. “And Tubbo read it, didn’t he?”

“We...” Ranboo pauses, wincing. “We read it aloud.”

Tommy holds onto the sides of the journal so tightly his knuckles turn white. “Aloud?” He asks hoarsely. “To... Why? Why would you do that?” His anger sparks and burns quickly. “What, did you all decide to have a good laugh? Everyone was so fucking desperate to hear about the freakshow you had to fight over who got to read it? Where’d you do it, huh? The podium in L’Manberg for the best reach?” His voice is shaking.

“Tommy... please, it wasn’t... it wasn’t like that. Maybe we shouldn’t have, but... someone had to read it to try and see if we could find you or...” Ranboo feels like it’s a feeble excuse.

Tommy tries to bottle his anger. He had known that they had the journal, he didn’t know the extent of it all. He shouldn’t assume the worst, even if it feels too easy to. “Ranboo, you’ve got to tell me what exactly happened. Who read this?” He looks up at his friend with urgent dread.

“Well,” Ranboo pauses. He doesn’t know how to explain this. “What do you want to know?”

“All of it. Ranboo, tell me all of it,” Tommy stares at him like he needs this, like these answers will somehow fix something for him.

What’s Ranboo meant to do? Say *no*?

“Well. I... It started when I found something written in my memory book, I think. I wrote *FIND TOMMY* in it. I don’t remember why, really. But that’s when I started looking. I found your grave was all dug up. Tubbo saw it too. We were both kinda freaked out. We didn’t... we didn’t check properly to see if you were still there because at that point we didn’t see why you *wouldn’t* be there, you know?”

Tommy nods, watching him almost impatiently, so Ranboo persists.

“We got everyone to the community house. And Techno showed up and said he saw Dream kill you, which... didn’t make any sense. We’d seen your body.” This is so strange. Talking about Tommy’s corpse *to him*. Tommy makes no note of it, merely nods again for Ranboo to continue. “...And we weren’t sure if we could believe him. Until... Until Connor.”

“Connor?” Tommy frowns. “Connor saw me— He said he saw me and Dream. He didn’t know something was wrong because I…” Tommy takes a deep breath, bottling regret and whatever else that stirs inside of him. “Because I left with Dream willingly.”

“Oh,” Ranboo isn’t sure how to respond to that. “Well, he showed up and told us Dream brought you back to life.”

“He knew about revival? Did he see Dream revive me?” Tommy asks eagerly.

“I… I don’t know, Tommy. He did say Dream revived you. So he had to know somehow, right? We weren’t sure if we could trust him, so we… we checked your grave.” Ranboo once more checks Tommy for a reaction. Nothing. “Once we knew it was empty, we knew we had to find you. And that Dream had you. So we made a plan. Sam had been working with Dream on building a prison, so he asked Dream to meet with him, and then we… we grabbed him.”

“What?” Now Tommy reacts, his eyes wide. He’s still curious about Connor, but that’s something to deal with at a later time. This feels more important. “You… you grabbed Dream? What do you mean you *grabbed Dream*?”

“We… well, not really *me*, Techno and Sam mostly,” Ranboo says carefully.

Tommy almost looks intrigued— or perhaps worse, *excited*. “What did you do to him?”

*What did you do to him?*

What a particular way to phrase that. Ranboo does his best not to overthink it, even as he knows exactly what that mentality grew from. “Nothing, really.” Tommy definitely looks disappointed now. Ranboo continues to ignore it. “We… we interrogated him. And we read the book.”

“Who?”

“What?”

“Who all saw the fucking book?” Tommy doesn’t quite sound angry, at least not angry for Tommy, but Ranboo feels guilty either way.

“Uh. Well. There was…” Ranboo thinks it over carefully. “Me, Tubbo, Techno, Phil, Sam, Puffy, Quackity, and Sapnap.”

Tommy stares down at the book open on his lap. He isn’t sure if he’s going to laugh or be sick. “Oh, is that all?” He mumbles.

“Well, unless I’ve forgotten someone, which *is* a possibility…” Ranboo teases back uncertainly, trying to lighten the mood.

Tommy tries to force a smile. It doesn’t quite work. “You said you didn’t read all of it.”

“Yeah.”

“So how much did you read?”

Ranboo hesitates, wincing. “Puffy stopped... she stopped when he wrote about the insects.”

Tommy glanced up at him. “So you did see. You saw why t-the... Why the bee getting on me was... why it was gross.”

“No, actually. I... I think that’s why she stopped.”

Tommy manages a nod, staring down at the page open at his feet without really seeing it.

“He... He had a revive book, didn’t he? Did you get anything from that?” Tommy pushes on. He doesn’t want to think about how much all of those people saw. It was bad enough that most of the server saw him as Dream’s bloody and beaten hostage.

“It... It was destroyed. It exploded the moment I opened it. I’m sorry, Tommy.” Ranboo is struck by the horrible realization that he had destroyed a revive book. Intentional or not, he’d held the answers to Tommy’s current haunting in his hands and he’d watched it burn. “I am... so sorry.”

“S’alright. I dunno much about them. I’m guessing you’ve got to do some shit to make it work. And I think they’re a one time deal. He never had a revive book after he brought me back, just his... just this,” Tommy continues to stare at the book in his lap with disgust and morbid curiosity. Tommy shakes his head, trying to clear bitter thoughts. He has more important things to think on now. “Wait– Wait, but... How did Dream get away?”

Ranboo feels sick. It had made sense at the time, but Ranboo knows no matter how he says this, it’s going to hurt. It will give Tommy even more to overthink. Not to say Ranboo hasn’t had the same thought. He didn’t know if, had they kept Dream, if Tommy would’ve been spared from some suffering or even if they could’ve gotten Wilbur back. There are no answers, only more things to regret.

He just has to say it.

“We let him go.”

“*What?*” Tommy looks up sharply, turning to stare at him, incredulous and almost hurt.

“We...” Ranboo at least looks painfully remorseful. “We let him go. He wasn’t gonna tell us where you were, and he said... he said you were going to starve without him. And– And if we tried torturing him, he’d just do whatever we did to you, so...”

“*Starve?* That’s– *That’s* why you let him go? Because he said I was gonna *starve?*” Tommy blusters. “I– I already *was* fuckin’ starving you fucking– You–” Tommy scrounges for a fitting insult, his anger made a decent mask for how this wounded him. Tommy stops, taking a deep breath, his words softer now, hesitant and almost ashamed of his outburst. “Why’d... I dunno why you all did that... He was already...” Tommy takes another shaky breath. It’s like his lungs feel smaller, like his ribs are wrapping more tightly around his

chest. He knows he can't be angry, but he just doesn't understand so much. "Wait—" He shakes his head, a different thought coming to mind. "So when did you come in?"

"Come... in..?" Ranboo still sounds so meek. He doesn't know how to help and he's so scared of saying the wrong thing. He doesn't want to make this any worse than it already is.

"Yeah. Yeah, when did you show up? With the... With the glowy eyes and the potion and shit?" Tommy is trying to read his face. Ranboo quickly looks away, Tommy's eyes too piercing and without regard for politeness or comfort. Not that Ranboo can blame him.

"I'm not totally sure," Ranboo fumbles out a reply. "I... I couldn't remember. But later, I got... bits and pieces of it. I think I went there before I found the message in my book."

"So, that was *before* you got Dream?"

"Yeah."

"Right," Tommy tries to piece it together in his head. If they had kept Dream, it wasn't like they would've saved him from much. In the grand scheme of things, those last days weren't too painful. Ranboo had seen him *after* Dream had... Well. Made him pay for talking to the Enderman. But Ranboo got the message. It doesn't quite make the pain *worth it*, but it makes Tommy feel better somehow.

"Tommy, what was... You said I was in the book. What do you mean?" Ranboo asks carefully.

"Oh, right, here," Tommy shoves the book his way.

Ranboo begins at the top of the page. The writing is slanted and shaking, blood brushed against the pages alongside the ink.

*"He's lost his fucking mind. Or if he hasn't he's lucky I didn't take his sanity. The fucking moron talked to an Enderman. If that gets back to Ranboo (the real Ranboo. I think the bits of him wandering around L'Manberg like a lost lamb is too much of a pussy to do anything, but if the proper Ranboo hears it) then he could find a way here. I might need to make plans to move them. I mean I did make him pay for it. I learned how far I can push Tommy before he dies. Surprisingly far. If I wedge something between his ribs to stop his lung from collapsing I can put off him drowning in his own blood for a good 20 minutes. I only had a blaze rod handy and it's hard to tell, because stabbing him in the lung is going to make him scream regardless (I mean not scream. He can't scream with blood in his lungs more like twitch), but I think the blaze rod burned from the way he reacted. That's just a bonus really. The kid also knows how to die quietly. I didn't even notice. I mean to be fair he'd been playing games all night. Tried to play dead at one point so obviously when he stopped moving I just kept going. Took his chest caving in for me to realize he was definitely gone.—"*

Ranboo should've stopped reading sooner. He can't bring himself to look over at Tommy. He can't look at the page either.

"Ranboo?"

“Hm?”

“What do you think it means?”

“What?”

“The... The bits about you, man. I dunno how else to say it,” Tommy gestures adamantly to the page. “That stuff.”

“Oh,” Ranboo looks back at it, trying to force his eyes not to be drawn to the latter half of the paragraph. “I... I don’t really know.” There’s this terrible itch in the back of Ranboo’s brain now, wondering about the parts of himself he doesn’t know. *What does the Enderwalk have to do with Tommy?* He knows Tommy is just desperately searching for something, for *anything* to help him, but the fact of it is Ranboo has nothing to give. “If I do know, or... *did* know, I guess. I’m thinking I’ve forgotten. If I knew anything that would help, Tommy, I’d tell you,” he says firmly.

Tommy nods, that serious frown refusing to leave. He flicks back to one of many haunting pages.

*“The god showed.”*

That *has* to mean something. “*The god*” means a god outside of Dream, someone Tommy could beg for help and maybe get an answer from.

Ranboo watches him continue to flip through the pages. He doesn’t know how Tommy can bear it. He speaks before he can stop himself. “You have to stop reading that, man, it’s gonna drive you insane.”

“Any worse than living it, huh?” Tommy doesn’t even look up, merely replies flatly. That shuts Ranboo up immediately. There’s nothing *to* say to that, so he doesn’t.

Tommy doesn’t care what they think of it. He knows it isn’t good for him, he’s picking apart his own torture for answers on how to get Wilbur back, but he can see no other option for himself.

*“Investigating limb loss today. I’ve been trying to figure out the best way to begin, I think cutting off a finger is the safest route. I know he’s going to be a brat about this one. He’ll get scared of the permanent damage, but I’m going to make it fun. I’ll give him some choices, and I’ll let him start the process. More generous than he deserves, but that’s fine. I can be generous. This is the most exciting one to happen in a while.”*

Tommy can’t help but hold onto his left hand, feeling that empty space still unfamiliar and harsh. “*I’m going to make it fun.*” “*I can be generous.*” No one else besides Dream was supposed to see this journal. Every word written here is what Dream considers to be truth. Dream had really thought Tommy might enjoy deciding his own fate with a fucking *game*.

*“This did not go quite according to plan. I left the knife with Tommy when I went to kill Wilbur. I should’ve taken it, but I didn’t. I thought he wouldn’t take it, but I’ll admit I wanted*

*to see. I knew I'd left it in reach. Sometimes I just need to test him. He failed of course. He took it and fucking hid from me. I don't think he'd actually be able to use it on me, but I had to make sure he paid for it."*

Tommy should've guessed it was a trap. It made sense. Same with Tommy getting ahold of Dream's journal the first time. He hates it all the same. His entire reality had been a game, every attempt of resistance he had was calculated by Dream as well. Even Tommy fighting back was just another part of Dream toying with him.

*"Before that, he was surprisingly docile. He went along with it, tried to make a choice he thought I would approve of, he wasn't any more reluctant than someone normal would be for trying to choose what digit to lose, although I was hoping I would've broken that hesitation out of him by now. Still, taking the knife was a step backwards. He still needs training. I cut off his left index finger, killed him with a head wound. It didn't grow back. Disappointing. Organs grew back before, so some stuff does. Maybe I'll try more stuff with dissection. I should get back to him now. I just left him in the main vault shaking like a leaf and crying about his hand. Pathetic. I'll need to think of a proper punishment for him taking the knife."*

Tommy shudders. *Dissection.*

This time Ranboo doesn't try and get him to stop reading it, even as he's hyper aware of Tommy's reactions, he just lets Tommy do as he pleases, stirring the fire gloomily.

Tommy *knows* this is bad for him. That doesn't mean he's going to stop, and *that* doesn't mean he doesn't find the way Dream writes about him revolting. He skips over the next bit, the mentions of Ranboo and the Enderman, followed by the anger. He remembers it all too well. The way Dream described keeping him alive... like they were notes for future reference, for the *next time* he needed Tommy breathing and drowning in his own blood at the same time.

*"I think the blaze rod burned from the way he reacted. That's just a bonus really."*

It *had* burned. Like Dream had shoved a red hot poker between his ribs...

*"He healed when I brought him back of course. Had to fix that. Was more careful that time though. He's not fucking getting away from me dying or no dying. I'm not sure if it's worth trying to keep his loyalty or if I should just break him so he's too scared to breathe without my permission. To be fair as long as I keep Wilbur out of it he'll keep needing me. Tommy cannot survive without someone. I can do whatever I want with him and he'll still be there begging me to hurt him because it's better than being alone. I've punished him enough for this one I think. Now time for damage control."*

Dream mulls over how to treat Tommy like he's trying to sort his belongings, he talks about *breaking him* like that should have some set meaning, instead of hanging there an ominous, far from empty threat. Dream debates what he'll do to Tommy like he's figuring out how to repair a machine. Tommy struggles to fathom it. *You're trying to think of a different way to describe it but you know what it is. He talks about you like you're a dog. You're his unruly pet and he's your owner.*



*He was your owner. Not anymore.*

*Nice one, Tommy. Like thinking about it in the past tense makes it any less fucked up that you're thinking about it at all.*

Tommy keeps reading like it will get any better. The writing next comes with a tinge of madness, or *more* madness, really. The quill tearing through the paper, the writing slanted and shaking. Tommy knows what's happened. He recognizes that rage.

*"There's a lot to update on. Those fucking idiots in L'Manberg figured things out. Sam betrayed me (I'll deal with that later. Haven't decided how yet but if not Fran then Ponk. Not to mention punishing the others. I'll make them all pay) but I got them to let me go. They must think they can get to me before I disappear again. They lost their one chance. They should know by now once you have something the moment you let it go it's gone forever. I'll have to disappear for a while. No one in the mainland can see me after this, but once Tommy and Wilbur are secure it should be fine."*

Tommy feels like he should warn Sam, but from the way Sam is following Ponk like an anxious personal guard he must already know. Tommy doesn't like learning about Dream's logic, getting to know his diseased philosophies of *ownership*. No wonder Dream kept Tommy in such a tight hold. Tommy doesn't know what to think of his own freedom now. Dream all but wrote that if he lost Tommy, he'd lost him forever. But Tommy knows Dream would never give up. The only logic to follow is that right now Dream thinks he *still has* Tommy.

Maybe he should take a break from reading this. He's beginning to feel faint.

"Where's Tubbo?" Tommy asks, closing the book.

"He should be on his way. He's bringing back food from Niki's place." Ranboo looks relieved when he sets it aside.

"I thought she'd stopped baking?"

"No, no I think she still does. Or she's started doing it again, at least. Just not at the bakery by L'Manberg I don't think," Ranboo relaxes, this choice in conversation far less worrying.

"I haven't seen her much. I haven't seen a lot of people very much. It's weird that I'm able to, you know?" Tommy frowns, staring at the fire. He hasn't been outside all day.

"You should message her. Or... whoever. They'd want to come by," Ranboo hopes Tommy will listen to him. He doesn't think he will.

Tommy shrugs. He doesn't know why anyone would want to trek out to the snow in the middle of nowhere to sit and chat with someone as fucked up as him. Doesn't exactly make for good conversation. Everything Tommy thinks people might have liked about him, like working on projects, going on walks, plotting pranks, that's all dead. He doesn't know what there is left that anyone might want.

“I’m home!” Tubbo opens the front door, cold air sweeping through the house. “And I have food! It’s probably cold by now, but it was fresh when I got it from Niki, so. You can’t complain.”

Ranboo gets up to help him. Tommy remains by the fire, staring off into space. Focusing is exhausting. Tubbo hesitates when he sees the book beside Tommy, but it remains shut, so he proceeds as normally as he can.

“I got Niki to make carrot cake, you know,” Tubbo says.

“You did?” Tommy stands. His enthusiasm is clearly forced, but he doesn’t want it to be. Tommy is trying to care about the good things. He knows they *should* matter to him, but caring about anything feels so fuzzy and distant in his mind.

“Yep! Do you want to put some music on while we eat?” Tubbo nods to the jukebox now settled in the corner.

“Yeah!” Tommy goes to his enderchest, mulling it over for a moment before settling on chirp. This he feels genuine excitement for. At least he hopes it’s excitement and not desperation, not an echo of that yearning from his time alone in limbo. He buries that debate and plays it. It’s an easy thing. Tommy had forgotten things that made him happy could be easy, that joy isn’t always a determined climb towards the light, and instead it just *is*.

This peace is too good to last.

Tommy eats and he eats well, and that’s progress, but soon after he’s itching to open that book again. The music stops, he puts the disc away, and that part doesn’t hurt. That’s *good*. The problem is when these peaceful pauses stretch out and all he can think of are the hours passing by for Wilbur alone. Whatever peace he may find is going to be tainted by Wilbur being missing, maybe even more than by Dream hanging over his head.

“You finished your carrot cake,” Ranboo sounds surprised.

“Yeah, don’t need to fuckin’ point it out.”

“Sorry, it’s just— That’s good, right?”

Tommy scowls. “You’re fucking weird, Ranboo. It’s *cake*.”

“Right,” Ranboo looks to Tubbo helplessly, Tubbo just shrugs.

Tommy returns to his spot by the fire, retrieving the book. He can feel Tubbo and Ranboo watching him. He buries the urge to tell them to fuck off. He’s got more important things on his mind. He’s almost to the end.

*“Other updates: Tommy killed himself (again) and he and Wilbur tried to trick me. Some bullshit story about limbo ‘ending.’ I think it’s a lie, but I can always press for answers later. I would’ve made them talk then and there but Wilbur got bold. I had to stop. He and Tommy were definitely just trying to stall for time. They were too late. I had to run, though. I*

*shoved Wilbur back in the walls. Hopefully I'll be able to tunnel in later and take him back, but I could only carry one. I picked Tommy obviously."*

Tommy stops, looking at the fire, trying to steady himself and not puke up cake. "*I picked Tommy obviously.*" Tommy is so fucking *tired* of Dream picking him. Of Dream treating him like he's something *precious* in the most brutal way possible. Not precious as in something to care for, but a *prize* to keep. The more Tommy reads this book the less he feels like a person sometimes.

"You're still reading it, huh?" Tubbo knows Tommy doesn't want to talk, but for days now he's seen Tommy reading, and then stopping and staring off into space with this numbed, horrified expression, like those pages are dragging Tommy back to a cell. And here he is again, pausing to look revolted, but returning to that book like it has a hold on him. *That book* is a manifestation of Dream. As long as Tommy keeps reading it, Dream still has him at his beck and call.

"...yeah? So what?" Tommy gives him a look, eyes narrowed, suspicious.

"You haven't found anything yet, Tommy. I would've thought you'd give it a rest by now," Tubbo forces his voice to remain level, even as he wants to grab the thing and chuck it into the fire.

"What, are you gonna take it from me?" Tommy snaps, defensive in an instant.

"No— take it—? No, I'm not gonna *take it from you*, Tommy," Tubbo sputtered.

"Yeah, well, you *sound* like you're gonna," Tommy mutters, holding onto the book tighter.

"Yeah, I don't *like it*, Tommy, but it's yours. I can't do shit about it unless *you* want to," Tubbo is both defensive and wanting to reassure him, irritation and caring all tangled up together.

Tommy scoffs. "Yeah. If only that were true for the past however many fucking months..."

"That wasn't *me*, Tommy!" Tubbo's frustration is joined by horror. "Oh my *god*— You— Do you actually think—"

"I don't fucking mean it like that!" Tommy only gets more defensive. "It wasn't about *you* it was— It was just about Dream not giving me a choice, not *you* not giving me a choice. I— I messed up, I said it wrong, is all!" A pause. Tubbo with no reply, and Tommy wanting to give him something more. "I know you're not Dream, Tubbo. You're nothing like him. I just... you know. Get fucked up about some stuff sometimes."

Tubbo manages a nod. If he let himself be more vulnerable, if he were less adept at keeping himself contained, he would look on the verge of tears. Instead his lip trembles for a moment and then it's gone. "I just... I wish you wouldn't, Tommy. That book— *his* book. I think it's doing a lot more harm than good."

Tommy sighs. “I know. And I’m not gonna say you’re wrong about that, man, but I have to read it, there has to be something here,” Tommy stares at the page he has open. This one doesn’t have blood on it. It doesn’t have the answers he’s looking for either, but there’s something. Bits and pieces strewn through these monstrous pages that indicate there’s *something* he can reach towards. Tommy pushes on with grim determination. He’s good at not giving up. That’s another thing Dream never managed to take from him. “All this research— I’m gonna find out how to get Wilbur back.”

He and Tubbo had reached a moment of peace. With those words, it dies.

Tubbo feels a sickening fury burst out before he can stop himself, anger laden on every word, useless and bitter, as any target worthy of Tubbo’s wrath is gone. “It’s not fucking *research*, Tommy. You’re not gonna *find* anything in there! It’s just a- a *catalogue* for his *fucking sadism!*” He spits the words through bared teeth, without Dream to target, his anger just radiates like a poison.

Silence. Tubbo expected Tommy to shout at him. He expected another argument incited and for Tommy to get defensive and for Tubbo’s frustration to continue to grow. Instead, Tommy looks stunned. He stares at Tubbo with wide eyes, mouth hanging open slightly, and for a moment Tubbo is worried he scared him, that this might be one of those moments where Tommy does that thing where he freezes or covers his head because he’s expecting someone to hit him, but it’s not that either. Tommy just looks shocked. And the silence stretches on, like a weight oppressing the room. What Tubbo would give for Tommy to shout at him right now.

Tommy is reeling. He almost would’ve preferred if he *had* been scared of Tubbo for a moment. That he could’ve puzzled out, he could’ve picked apart that fear and understood it, even if the source didn’t make sense. This is something else entirely. This is something that doesn’t even really have to *do* with Tubbo.

It hadn’t occurred to him that maybe Dream had just done it for fun. Maybe it hadn’t even occurred to Dream. But if it’s not *research*, if it wasn’t Dream trying to make them *figure out immortality together* then...

*But it has to mean something. It has to. It can’t have been for nothing. Oh god— please let it not have been for nothing. It has to have meant something, fuck— it’s not research it’s not research it’s not research it’s nothing it’s nothing it was all fucking nothing IT’S NOTHING IT’S ALL FUCKING NOTHING IT NEVER MEANT FUCKING ANYTHING ALL OF IT ALL OF THAT PAIN ALL OF YOU DYING OVER AND FUCKING OVER AND OVER IT MEANT NOTHING AND NOTHING WILL COME OF THIS AND ONE DAY YOU’RE GOING TO FUCKING DIE ANYWAY AND ALL OF THIS WON’T MEAN ANYTHING BECAUSE IT WAS JUST DREAM IT WAS JUST DREAM HAVING FUN IT WAS JUST DREAM HURTING YOU BECAUSE HE COULD AND IT’S FUCKING WORTHLESS BUT YOU FUCKING FELL FOR IT DIDN’T YOU BECAUSE IT HAS TO MEAN SOMETHING YOU AT LEAST THOUGHT YOU WERE A SACRIFICE BUT YOU’RE NOT EVEN THAT YOU’RE JUST THE FAVORITE PLAYTHING OF AN EVIL MAN BECAUSE HE’S NOT A GOD BUT YOU WORSHIPED HIM BECAUSE AT LEAST WHEN YOU HURT IT WAS FEEDING SOMETHING BUT HE’S NOTHING AND YOU’RE LESS THAN NOTHING NO*

*PURPOSE NO MEANING OR DISCOVERY OR WHATEVER BULLSHIT STORY HE FUCKING SOLD YOU WHEN HE PUT A KNIFE IN YOUR BACK YOU NEVER HAD A CHOICE AND YOU FUCKING BOUGHT IT ANYWAY AND AFTER ALL OF THAT YOU DON'T EVEN GET TO KEEP YOUR FUCKING BROTHER—*

Tommy doesn't remember standing up, but he's definitely standing now, he's swaying on his feet like he's about to collapse. He doesn't remember screaming, but his throat hurts, like he's choking on sobs but it's raw too like he screamed so loud he wanted it to hurt. He doesn't remember punching the wall but his knuckles are definitely broken and that's definitely blood dripping down his hand and before any more of those violent thoughts can continue to boil in his head he pulls back his bloody fist to punch the solid oak in front of him again but before he can something stops him—

No one grabs him. No one takes his hand or puts their arms around him to hold him down or anything, no— Tubbo just stands there. He steps between Tommy and the wall and does nothing else. Tommy freezes. He still wants to punch the wall, but Tubbo is in the way.

Tubbo smiles at him and it's almost like an apology. "Go ahead, bossman. I think you won't break your hand as bad hitting me, will you?"

Tommy was already falling apart. So he falls apart into Tubbo. No more punches thrown, no more screaming, Tommy collapses forward, pulling them both to the ground, holding onto Tubbo, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt, burying his face in Tubbo's shoulder as wailing sobs pour out of him, he's crying like the child he had once been, a child who hadn't known war or dying or loss, a child who had been able to cry into his brother's arms over a scraped knee, because blood had been new in those days.

He should give up. That's what he feels like he's *supposed* to do now. To grieve, to move on. To bury him.

"I gotta get him back, Tubbo," Tommy's voice trembles, every word a struggle as this fresh wave of grief hits him like an arrow to the throat, a knife to the back, a blaze rod in his chest, water in his lungs, and a pickaxe in his skull. "*Please*. Please— You've got to help me, s— someone fucking help me— If I don't get Wil— If I—" Tommy can't quantify the ache in his chest, he feels hollowed out. There aren't any words left for a pain like this, but Tubbo hugs back tighter, and somehow that understanding is enough.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your sweet comments they always brighten my day.

I'm back at college which means I am much busier, but I'll try and update somewhat consistently!

Thanks y'all <3



# Chapter 27

## Chapter Notes

Tags have been updated/I've changed the rating to mature for the violence! Not because of anything new happening in the story, but just because I looked back on stuff and went "huh this is probably a bit more gory than rated T"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I'm gonna help you, Tommy. Dunno how yet, but I'm gonna do whatever I can, okay?" Tubbo keeps one arm around Tommy.

Tommy nods. He's calmed, but instead he looks numb. "I... I dunno what I need. I dunno what to do about *any* of it, man."

This is the part where Tubbo offers a plan. It's where he gives Tommy a direction, where he acts as the leader he had been forced to become. He's so *tired* of being told to lead people. He has no idea what he's meant to do now, but he also feels guilt like a physical weight on his chest. It had been *his words* that had hurt Tommy so brutally. He doesn't know how to reconcile with that.

"I... I don't know either, Tommy," Tubbo says softly. He stares at the fire, mind still wandering ceaselessly.

Tommy nods again, unsurprised. "Let me... let me see," Tommy pulls out a book and for a moment Tubbo's blood runs cold.

It's not *that* book. It's Tommy's.

Tommy sits up, leaning forward, hunched over the book. He tries to hold a quill. "Ah, f-fuck, I didn't—" Tommy's hand throbs painfully.

"I'll get something for that," Tubbo stands and Ranboo replaces him almost immediately.

"Do you want me to write it down for you?" Ranboo gently takes the quill from him.

Tommy frowns, staring at Ranboo's hand holding the quill almost warily. He shrugs. "Dunno if I can put the words together. It's all jumbled in my head like, uh. Like someone's tipped over the filing cabinet and it's all spilled out, you know?"

Ranboo hesitates. "I... I think so. Do you want to... maybe tell me what you're trying to do?"

Tommy considers this for a moment. “I... I think I might already know what I want. But—” *It scares me.* “Basically, I wanted to make a... a list. Like pros and cons. Lists help.”

“Okay. Do you want to tell me the pros?” Ranboo offers.

“Er. Okay. It’s got books in it. Lots of them. And I’m pretty sure it’s got stuff that might help me with the revival shit.”

“Oh... okay,” Ranboo hesitates, but writes it down for him.

“And I know where it is, or, actually, *you* all know where it is, so—”

“We know where—? Wait, Tommy what is this?” Ranboo is growing more worried now.

Tubbo rejoins them. “Here, bossman, can I see your hand?”

Tommy looks almost panicked, holding his injured hand close to his chest. “I d-don’t think you’re gonna like it. So, you can’t touch my hand until I say this bit.”

Tubbo looks like he wants to protest for a moment, still staring at Tommy’s bloody knuckles, but he reconsiders, sitting back, putting some distance between them.

“Okay... okay,” Tommy glances between them. “I want to— I want to make a choice for myself. A-And it’s *mine*, you got that? You can’t— You can’t judge me for it, alright?” Tommy says it like an accusation.

“Okay, Tommy,” Ranboo says immediately. After another moment of hesitation, Tubbo nods. Tommy gets to process however he wants.

“I w-want you...” Tommy takes a deep breath, “I want you to take me back.”

Tubbo and Ranboo exchange a look. “Back where?” Tubbo asks carefully.

“To... to that place. The one you all...” Tommy feels a lump in his throat. He doesn’t know why he feels ashamed. “The one you all saw. The one in the mountain.”

They stare at him with frozen dread. Tommy is mostly grateful that they’re not looking at him with pity.

“Tommy... why... why would you want to go back there?” Ranboo speaks up softly.

“Because of— Because of the library. And... that’s where...” Tommy feels like he’s choking. A shaky inhale, he pushes on. “That’s where a lot of it happened.” Tommy tries to force some conviction into his voice. “I wanna try and find something.”

“If you want the library, we could bring it here—”

“No,” Tommy says sharply. “I need to... to see it for myself. I know it sounds fucking insane, man, but you’ve got to believe me. I... I feel like I *need* to do this.”



Tubbo hasn't said a word.

How can he? How, after everything he just witnessed, the outcome of *his* words, is he meant to say no to him?

"Tubbo?" Tommy asks. He wants Tubbo's approval. Maybe even worse, he feels like he needs it.

"Okay, Tommy," Tubbo nods slowly. Tommy looks surprised. Tubbo sighs. "I don't like it. But I said I was gonna help you. If this is how... I'm with you, man. Through all of it."

Tommy knows trusting Tubbo to be beside him should be the most natural thing in the world, but then again, nothing about Tommy's existence has been *natural* as of late. Still, it's not that he doesn't trust Tubbo, in fact it's the opposite. Tommy feels that trust like old scar tissue, it's different now, but still healed.

Trust is one thing, getting there is another matter entirely. They know how to get to the portal in the Nether, but it's rough terrain. Getting to the new coordinates last time had involved quite the trek before they could find an access point to the Nether roof. For them, they would have to traverse from the main portal through the Nether with no path to guide them. Tommy is remarkably better health-wise. He is not ready for such a journey, but this is what Tommy wants, and while Ponk would have scolded them all tirelessly for putting their patient in danger, that doesn't mean they won't manage this.

Tommy puts on armor again. It feels wrong. It feels *heavy*. He's not as sore as he was the last time he had tried to wear armor, he's healed a lot, but it's not easy.

"Here are some gapples. And— And a strength potion. I think that might be a good idea," Ranboo mutters, passing him the assortment like a worried mother hen.

Tommy does not tease him or tell him to *man up, bitch!* He accepts it all, voice too soft. "Thanks, Ranboo."

"I could..." Ranboo trails off for a moment, lost in thought. "I could carry you, you know. Nothing wrong with that."

"No fuckin' way. *You* carry *me*? Now? I'm a big man. Maybe I should carry *you*," Tommy turns on a dime, boastful and cocky in an instant.

"We should go soon. Before it gets too late in the day. Last thing I'd want is for us to end up camping out there," Tubbo checks his axe carefully.

"Should we... should we see if anyone else will go? Just for... you know, extra security?" Ranboo asks.

"No. No, I want to do this with just you two," Tommy interjects immediately.

Ranboo and Tubbo exchange worried glances, both of them endeared and concerned by Tommy's faith in them.

It should have been an easy start. They go through the main portal and there's a decent stretch of roadways before they would have to abandon them. Tommy is slow. Even with the cane, his limp hurts when he tries to walk faster. He keeps an iron grip on the axe at his belt. The heat of the Nether is almost disorienting and the occasional dips in the roads and stairs descending throw him off further. The lava is too bright. Ranboo has to slow to half his usual stride to keep beside him. Tommy's focus remains resolutely ahead, following Tubbo.

Then Tommy hears screaming. A familiar, piercing screech.

Tommy's panic flares and shifts in a second. He knows he cannot run. Running doesn't work, running gets an arrow in his throat. Hiding doesn't work, he cannot cower away behind the rocks, because he will *always* be found.

Tommy swings the axe at the firecharge headed right for Ranboo's face. The screeching turns to a wail and dies soon after. Tommy can't remember the last time he killed a mob. Tommy's heart is beating so hard it hurts. Tommy feels like he should feel powerful right now, stronger. He fought back, he didn't hesitate. He just feels shaky. Tubbo and Ranboo have not continued down the path, they both just stare at him, shocked.

Tommy can't stand it. "Hey— *I* can be surprised by my own fucking competency, *you* two should just look at me and go 'wow, that's Tommy alright! Kicking ass and taking names like he always does!' got it?"

It breaks the spell. "Nice one, man," Ranboo says, still sounding nervous, but that's not out of the ordinary for him. "Thanks for uh, for doing that."

"Yeah, your welcome from stopping your face getting blown off," Tommy says brusquely, proceeding down the path perhaps too fast considering how much his leg still hurts him. "Tubbo, walk faster! I dunno where I'm going."

The trip proceeds uneventfully, until they have to leave the path.

"Easiest way is along the shore. We should be able to get over patches that don't have soul sand. We left a path the first time, I think," Tubbo frowns. He doesn't remember the trip all that well. "Ranboo—?" He begins, before realizing asking Ranboo if he *remembers* is probably an exercise in futility. Tubbo sighs. "I think it's close to the road, so. It shouldn't take long."

Tommy nods, sticking close behind him. He can feel the heat of the lava. He's just waiting for his shit leg to give out so he falls. Although, a pool of lava is a quick death, easy. An easy resurrection too.

If that were still an option for him, that is.

Tommy just focuses on Tubbo's back, refusing to look to either side. One step in front of the other, and he'll ignore the heat and glow of the lava far too close. He's so focused on Tubbo, he doesn't recognize the familiar until it's right in his face. Tubbo begins to climb the slope of jagged netherrack, reaching back and offering Tommy a hand, which he accepts. He

almost lets go, almost falls back, as he sees the glow of the portal. He hadn't expected them to get there so soon.

Tubbo can see it on his face as he helps him up the slope. "You *sure* you want to do this, Tommy? We could... Ranboo and I, we could carry back all the books."

Tommy doesn't respond at first. He walks past him, to a familiar crater in the ground. He can't see the blood. Blood evaporates before it can dry in the Nether, and whatever might have lingered blends with the red rocks. He knows it's the pit, though. He remembers Dream, covered in Wilbur's blood, killing him for what would become the last time.

"Tommy?"

"I want to keep going," Tommy says this, but he doesn't move.

"What is it?" Ranboo asks, trying to see whatever it is Tommy is staring at.

Tommy points down into the crater. "Wilbur gave me the chance to run. He died for it. And I made it this far," he says dully. He's so tired. He's tired of hating himself for being the one that made it out. That doesn't mean he can bring himself to stop.

Tubbo puts a hand on his shoulder. "But you did get out, Tommy. He—" Tubbo pauses. It's hard, but maybe he has to acknowledge that the Wilbur Tommy had encountered these past months had been more like their old President and less like the lunatic who destroyed them. "He helped save you. He didn't die in vain."

Tommy stiffens. He doesn't look at him, just pulls away and heads for the portal. Ranboo and Tubbo exchange that worried look, but they still follow.

Tommy is still the first to materialize on the other side, stumbling forward off of the platform and back onto a familiar floor of bedrock and blackstone. The change is immediate.

"I shouldn't... I shouldn't have come back. I s-should— oh *fuck*," Tommy feels the dry, empty cold of being deep underground, the echoing room around him, all of it so agonizingly familiar, the room feels alive, an echo chamber of violence, an evil thing seeping into him deeper and deeper by the second.

He can still see Wilbur's blood on the floor. Tommy stumbles back until he hits the obsidian pillar beside the portal, he gasps for breath, like all the air is being pulled from his lungs, a ringing in his ears, but he can feel his chest heaving as he takes desperate gulps of air. He's drowning again. He claws at the obsidian behind him, anything to ground him, anything to make him stop thinking about how Wilbur died here alone—

"Tommy?"

Tommy screams, staggering to the side of the portal and collapsing onto a golden dais. "D-Don't! Please don't—" Tommy covers his head, waiting for a blow, unable to stop shaking, his eyes shut tight.

He knows he cannot run nor hide, but this time there's no fight left in him. He can only wait and cower and hope it will be over soon.

"Tommy, Tommy it's okay!" Tubbo kneels down beside him, reaching towards him frantically before stopping himself, realizing it's probably better he keeps his distance. "It's just us, bossman. You're okay."

Tommy relaxes a modicum, opening his eyes slowly, staring at Tubbo's face like if he blinks it'll turn into that awful mask. He doesn't get off the floor at first, merely focuses on catching his breath. He's mildly aware that he's avoided going into a full blown panic attack. He feels like he should be proud of that. Mostly he's just tired.

"Jesus, Tommy," Tubbo looks as weary as Tommy feels. "Are you *absolutely sure* about this?"

Tommy could leave. He knows he could and he knows his friends wouldn't judge him in the slightest. In the corner of his eye, Tommy can see the set of stairs that lead to a narrow corridor. A cruel, snide voice, aching familiar, grates against the back of his head, *welcome home, Tommy!*

Even worse is his own thought, a warning but sickening nonetheless, *he could be here. Maybe you don't think he's stupid enough to come back here, but he could be. He could be here waiting for you.*

"No. No, I'm..." Tommy sits up, rubbing his eyes. "Fuck..." He shakes himself, trying to clear some of the fog. "I'm good. I want to... to see it," he stares at that darkened doorway and slowly gets to his feet, like he's trying to sneak up on a monster.

Ranboo and Tubbo share that same worried look. Tommy is getting tired of that too. Tommy holds onto his axe a little tighter, approaching the stairwell. "S-Stay close to me, alright?" Tommy says hoarsely.

"We're right behind you," Ranboo nods.

He makes it up the stairs, pausing only for a moment at the head of the corridor. He can see where stone steps would lead down to a cell covered in his blood. Tommy does not go straight to the library. He turns right, into a room he can still consider to be something horribly like peaceful. He'd had a bed, a light, access to water, he'd had notebooks, warmth from the lava. He can't say this room had been *safe*, not when Dream could waltz in whenever he pleased, but it was as close to a sanctuary as he'd had here. He can't say he misses this cell, but there's an ache that's painful in a different sort of way when he returns to it. Two things had brought him solace in his time here, one had been this cell, and the other had been Dream's kindness. He can no longer disillusion himself into holding anything like fondness for the latter, so instead it goes to the former. Tommy brushes a hand against the edge of the sink. It's cool to the touch, and the water left to stagnate in the sink for the past weeks has a slight film over it now.

The flowers are still here.

The poppies are *well* past dead, but they're there nonetheless, shriveled to the point of crumbling, but still there. Tubbo and Ranboo had followed him inside, Ranboo's head nearly brushing the ceiling, and Tubbo follows his gaze and stares at the flowers with a grimace.

"You came to visit my grave," Tommy says something they both already know. "I knew you did."

"Yeah. Sorry you... sorry you had to find out that way," Tubbo stares at the flowers with utter resentment, like it's their fault that they had gotten to Tommy before he had.

"No," Tommy frowns. "No, the flowers weren't bad. They were nice. Reminded me of outside and that... I dunno. Maybe someone cared about me out there. And I'm glad you visited my grave, I am, but..." Tommy stops himself, goes to speak again, and stops himself again. There's a war going on behind his eyes. Tubbo can see it.

"But what?" Tubbo asks when the silence goes on too long.

Tommy hesitates, he speaks slowly, every word careful and deliberate. "You came to visit my grave, but you never came to visit *me*," Tommy begins, nothing quite *accusing* in his tone, but nothing kind either. "Back when I was still alive in exile," he explains. "You didn't visit me until I was dead, eh?"

"Tommy..." Tubbo sounds almost wounded.

"No, no, it's *fine*," Tommy says in a way that is most definitely not fine. Whatever conflict had been held internally now comes out. "I mean, a grave is quieter, I guess. Graves only do what you want," the bitterness bleeds through, raw and unrelenting. It's worse when it turns to something more pleading, more desperate, "but if you'd come to visit, it would've been the same. Like, if you'd come late enough, but before I killed myself, I mean." Tommy stares at him imploringly now, gesturing almost emphatically. "I would've been quiet. I would've done what you wanted." Tommy stops himself, like he's suddenly aware of how wrong all of this must seem. He winces, no longer meeting Tubbo's eyes, instead staring at the obsidian floor, a familiar action. He still keeps Tubbo in the peripheral, in case he moves. It's only on instinct. He knows Tubbo isn't going to hit him, but it's like his body still doesn't. The routine of it all feels especially cruel here. "But you never came, did you?" He glances back up to his best friend. He doesn't know why he keeps pushing. There are no answers that will bring him solace, especially in a place like this. "Why?"

Tubbo feels sick, every justification feels weak, but he can only offer the truth, however feeble it may be. "I... I thought you would've been mad at me." It sounds so much more childish than all of it had been. Tubbo had grown up so fast and so harshly, but that was still the truth of the matter. He'd believed his best friend wanted nothing to do with him and that he'd be right to.

"Oh," Tommy considers this carefully. "I mean, maybe. But I wouldn't have told you. If you'd come far enough along, I guess. Well, earlier I might've shouted at you." He explains it all like he's only being reasonable instead of ruined.

It's like a ringing in the back of Tubbo's mind, *wrong wrong wrong wrong*—

“Tommy—”

“I mean, I guess by the time I got quiet, Dream wouldn’t have let you visit. He... He never flat out said it, but he didn’t let anyone visit me, I think,” Tommy looks even gloomier, unable to hold back. “No one came to the beach party.” It sounds like such a silly thing after everything that had happened to him, but at the time nothing had felt more important or more painful.

Tubbo had had so much to say to Tommy’s tombstone. Accusations, desperate apologies, stories, explanations, everything he hadn’t been able to say to anyone else. Now there is nothing.

“I can’t give you a reason, Tommy. It’s just... what I said. I thought you hated me, and I felt... I felt bad. So I never came to see you. And me not knowing how bad it had gotten isn’t an excuse, but I wish I had. I wish I’d known enough to do something about it,” it’s all Tubbo has to give. He knows Tommy deserves so much more. He regrets exiling Tommy more than anything, and the cruelest part of that is he still thinks he made the best choice he could in that situation. There had been no other way out, by Dream’s design. Tubbo had people to protect, and he lost Tommy because of it. He can acknowledge that he’d had no other choice, but he’ll still hate himself for doing the only thing he could too.

Tommy gives another nod, staring at his dark outline reflected in the shallow water, brow furrowed. “I think I’m still mad at you for leaving me out there,” he speaks slowly, carefully. “But... I dunno *how* to be mad at you when I need you.”

“I need you too,” Tubbo replies so easily, like he doesn’t know how unfair it is for him to say that to him.

Tommy’s nose scrunches up in disgust. “You shouldn’t lie, Tubbo. Not to me. And...” he stares at the obsidian walls. So many hours wasted memorizing the cracks in the wall, the chip in the corner of the sink, the threads of the rough blanket he’d once taken so much comfort in. He’s never going to come back to this room. “And definitely not here.”

Tommy heads for the door and pretends like he doesn’t feel like he’s losing something in this room. It was a fucking *prison cell*. He cannot feel heartache for it. Tubbo doesn’t reply, just lets him leave, not that Tubbo can think of a single thing to say. Ranboo holds his silence, looking like he’d want nothing more than to teleport out of there.

Tommy thinks the library may offer solace to him. There had rarely been violence in the library, beyond maybe getting hit once or thrown to the ground, but those hardly seemed worth noting. He supposes Dream playing the disc here should be enough to remind him of old hysteria, but the jukebox is gone. That was the only evidence of his breakdown that mattered to him.

Not to say there isn’t dread, because Tommy finds the library in a state he had never seen before. It is not the burnt wreckage of valuable papers on Dream’s worktable, nor even the blood— at least not the blood alone— on the floor. All that he could dismiss.

It’s the bookshelf. It’s open. There’s an opening *behind the bookshelf*.

“What is this?” Tommy asks like anyone here can give him answers. He approaches the doorway carefully, half expecting a white mask to leer at him from the darkness, but the corridor seems empty, extending back into shadow.

“I... I don’t actually know. I think Phil and Ghostbur were the only ones to check out the library,” Tubbo is for the moment distracted from his guilt, following Tommy, a hand on his axe just in case.

“Ghostbur?” Tommy frowns. “But Wilbur never mentioned—”

*Oh.*

Too many realizations hit him all at once. It’s like he can still see Wilbur, frozen, staring off into space, after telling Tommy Ghostbur had gone into the library.

“Wil was— He—” Tommy cuts off his own explanations, no longer hesitating as he stumbles down the dark corridor with something awfully like urgency, fumbling blind, until he reaches a lever.

Ranboo’s voice echoes behind him. “Tommy, hang on, you shouldn’t just—”

Tommy doesn’t care. He needs to do this. He *needs* to see it. He pulls the lever.

The obsidian slides away and a redstone lamp flickers to life above. Illuminating dried blood in a pool on the floor.

“Right...” Tommy mutters, staring at the cell. He’s not quite surprised. In fact, this should have been exactly what he expected, but it still feels like something punched him in the chest as he takes it all in. This is what he had known was coming and he can’t stand it.

*“I’m fine, Tommy. Don’t worry about me.”*

*“So he did hurt you.”*

The cell is almost identical to the one Tommy had spent his worst hours in. Wilbur had returned to life for a very brief amount of time, and he had spent it all trapped within these four walls. Tommy feels like there’s an animal clawing at the inside of his chest, fighting to get out.

“It’s... It’s not fair,” Tommy mutters, staring around the room like somehow it will change, that the blood will disappear from the floor, the walls will stop closing in, and somehow he’ll stop obsessing over the fact that he made it out and Wilbur didn’t. The animal in his chest is tearing itself apart, unable to bear being caged between Tommy’s ribs.

Tubbo joins him and immediately understands. This cell, what it means, what it means to Tommy. The same as when he had gone into that dark room and seen Tommy’s blood sunken into the walls. “Tommy...” Tubbo puts a hand on his shoulder. He doesn’t know what to say.

“You guys were right,” Tommy still doesn’t move, his voice too calm for the cacophony roaring inside of his head. He remains transfixed, staring at the blood on the ground. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

They each load up on books, storing more in their enderchests so hopefully they will never have to come back here. Very little is said on the return journey, and so much is left unsaid. Tubbo isn't looking him in the eyes again. Tommy now has a new project, a fresh reason not to talk to his friends about all the pain still boiling inside of him. And they don’t bother him. They encourage him to go outside, to spend time in L’Manberg, but it’s not like they can try to order him around in good conscience.

Ponk comes by again to check on him, praising him for the weight he’s put on. They give Tommy a book of instructions, physical therapy to help with his leg, and Sam mentions that he’s been fiddling around with some stuff to make a brace. Tommy thanks them both. He doesn’t put much stake in it. The physical therapy is taxing and he finds himself slipping, he doesn’t do it, he eats only when he’s reminded to, he goes outside when he’s asked. Tommy does very little for himself. He keeps himself alive because he has a purpose to serve.

The books from Dream’s library are confusing. Half of them are in a language he doesn’t understand and maybe a quarter of those Ranboo tries to help translate. The ones he can read himself are flooded with concepts he doesn’t understand. Things like *Platonic Forms* and a metaphor of *the Chariot of the soul* proving it immortal. No more comprehensible to him were texts on cell regeneration and decay. Some of the books had annotations, but none coherent enough to tell him what Dream had actually *done* with the information. At one point Tommy found a psychology textbook on how trauma effects the brain. It had several pages dogeared. He set that one aside quickly.

It all felt so useless to him.

He almost thinks trying to read this shit is as self destructive as his efforts to read Dream’s awful journal, which he had thankfully left buried in a chest downstairs, where it would stay. Tommy can’t *fix* things with a book, he needs things to do, plans of action to try and people to help him.

<The\_Eret> hi Tommy! Are you in Snowchester?

Tommy stares at his comm, frowning.

<TommyInnit> yeah.

<TommyInnit> why

<The\_Eret> I wanted to stop by, if that’s ok?

Tommy stares ruefully at his pile of books. Eret was smart. They... knew stuff. He could at least bully them into trying to read some of it.

<TommyInnit> yeah ok that’s fine



<The\_Eret> Thank ^^

Eret arrives quickly. “I, uh. Brought cake,” they set it on Tubbo’s dining table with an unsure nod. They don’t mention Tommy answering the door with an axe at the ready.

“Oh. Uh. Thanks,” Tommy shifts from foot to foot, awkward and unsure, tossing aside the axe sheepishly. “So, uh. What’ve you been up to, then, *King Eret*?”

Eret laughs at the title. “Not much, really. I’ve been out with my knights some, looking for... you know, for Dream,” Eret hesitates, unsure if they should’ve chosen that particular subject.

“Wait, you have knights?” Tommy scoffs.

“Kind of. Well, not kind of, I *do*, I knighted them,” Eret almost seems embarrassed by the topic.

“Who’s that, then?” Tommy folds his arms over his chest, already judging them, if not mostly teasingly.

“Well, Puffy, HBomb, Punz, and like, *technically* George? For like a day? But he quit pretty quickly. I just did it to make him feel better since he got, y’know, dethroned,” Eret says.

“Huh. And, what, have you all *found* anything, then?” Tommy doesn’t mean to sound so harsh, but he’s sort of lost faith in anyone finding Dream. They won’t find Dream until he finally comes after him.

Eret wilts, catching his attitude. “No, we haven’t,” they at least sound apologetic. Tommy huffs in reply. Eret stares around the cabin, “I haven’t spent much time up here in Snowchester. It’s nice.”

“It’s alright,” Tommy shrugs.

“If you’d want to stay somewhere... somewhere closer to L’Manberg, my castle is always open to you, alright? I definitely have enough room.”

Tommy shakes his head. “No point. I’m as safe there as I am here, probably.”

Eret nods. “I mean, if you want a house in L’Manberg, I’m sure Fundy would let you have his. He lives somewhere else now, I think.”

Tommy shrugs noncommittally, uninterested in his own living situation. It’s so low on his list of priorities right now. Although, it does offer him a different train of thought, one more solemn and far more important. “D’you hear from the others much?”

Eret looks puzzled. “Others?”

“Y’know, Fundy. Niki and Jack— but I guess... I guess they were after your time, huh?” Tommy exhales a laugh.

“Oh,” Eret understands now. *L’Manberg* others. Eret pretends that doesn’t hurt. “Not so much, no. I haven’t spoken with Fundy in a while. Niki— I saw her a few days ago. She’s building something, I think. A bit far out from the mainlands. She was a little quiet about it. Jack I haven’t talked to in quite a while.”

Tommy nods. “Right... I mean, I haven’t talked to them in quite a while either,” he mutters. *They probably all hate me. I survived when Wilbur didn’t. Niki could hate me for that. I hurt Jack and then I fucking died and disappeared for months, he should hate me too. No fucking clue about Fundy. The only reason Eret doesn’t hate me is that they screwed me over so now they have to pity me.*

Eret breaks the spell. “Actually, I’m here because I wanted to introduce you to someone.”

Tommy looks up at Eret, surprised. “Wot?”

“Yeah, I heard about what you were trying to do. For Wilbur. And anything I can do to help— I’m there. Wilbur should be here. With his family,” Eret says firmly. Wilbur’s death has been a weight on their shoulders for a long time.

Tommy feels a lump in his throat. So few words should not reduce him to tears. “H-How—” He coughs, trying to steady himself. “How could you help me?”

“There’s this new guy, Foolish. He’s a... pretty friendly dude,” Eret laughs uncertainly. “Like an old friend, almost. But he’s a demigod. I think. I’m pretty sure that’s what he is, anyway. He’s a god of undying.”

“He’s a what?” Tommy sits up sharply, staring at Eret with something desperate behind his eyes.

“I haven’t asked him much about it, Tommy,” Eret raises their hands placatingly. “But I thought of it, and I thought maybe he could help you.”

“Yeah. Yeah, he could help me, so— How do I get him to help me? Where is he?” Tommy pushes, energy rising in a way that Eret can’t help but find disconcerting.

Eret hesitates, eyes unreadable behind their shades, but they’re far from closed off. Tommy can tell they’re worried about him. Still, they answer. “He’s probably at his summer home, and like I said, I’m more than happy to introduce you, but please know Tommy I don’t know if he can actually help you. I haven’t even asked him about it yet— and, well, I probably should have before now, but either way. I don’t know what’s going to happen with this, okay?”

Tommy nods. “I know, I know, yeah yeah technicalities— can we just go to this guy now or not?”

Eret frowns. “One second.” They type something out on their comm. “He should get back to me soon, I hope.”

Tommy nods, taking some of the cake and returning to his spot on the floor by the fire.

“What’s... what’s all this?” Eret joins him.

“Books,” Tommy says with his mouth full.

Eret laughs. “Yeah, I can see that, what are they?” Eret picks one up.

“Dream’s.”

They grimace and drop it. “And... what’re you doing with them?”

“Same reason you’re gonna take me to see Foolish,” Tommy says. “What kind of name is *Foolish* anyway? Am I supposed to think he can do fuck all if he’s so stupid they name him after it?”

“I... don’t actually know why his name is Foolish, actually.”

“Thought you two were old buddies or something?”

“No, well. I don’t know,” Eret looks more troubled now. “He seems to think—” Eret looks down at their comm, cutting the thought off. “Oh! He said he’d be willing to talk to you. He also says he has no idea how he’s supposed to help, but he’s willing to try, so, that’s something, right?”

“Right then,” Tommy stands with a sigh. “Let’s go, then? Where the fuck is his summer home?”

“It’s off in the desert, we’ll have to take a trip through the Nether,” Eret says almost apologetically.

Tommy frowns. “That’s fine.” It’s not like it is with Tubbo and Ranboo. He’s not going to freak out and embarrass himself in front of Eret. “Actually, reminds me, I should probably tell them where I’m...” Tommy grabs his own comm, hesitating over the buttons.

*<TommyInnit> goign to meet a demi god. Am with Eret so im safe. Be back soon*

*<Tubbo\_> ????*

*<TommyInnit> talk about it later*

*<Tubbo\_> Stay safe.*

Tommy hesitates once more, rereading that message. He and Tubbo haven’t talked, not properly, since those harsh words in the vault. Tommy doesn’t know how to talk to him anymore and it feels like Tubbo doesn’t know either. *Stay safe.*

*<TommyInnit> u too*

This isn't my best work I don't think but I hope it was still a good read! Yet again I wrote this chapter with the intention of getting to a Specific Part and YET AGAIN I did not do that! I write down a few lines for a scene idea and it ends up being so much more than I first planned and before I know it I have 5k words and a good stopping point :/

We'll get there next time. Or soon, at least!

Between updates, I have made more crimeboys content!

[Including this crimeboys poem](#)

[and this quiz which I am quite proud of!](#)

As always, thank you sm for your sweet comments/fanart/thoughts/etc. They keep me writing :D

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The journey is relatively easy, the lengthiest part being getting from Snowchester to the main portal. Tommy sticks close to Eret as they traverse the Nether. They don't comment on it, slowing down for him to keep pace. It's not far, the portal an easy shot from a small path away from the main portal. The hot air of the Nether is replaced by that of the desert, here a breeze coming off the ocean makes it a modicum cooler, the air tinged with salt.

"Fuck, it's bright," Tommy mutters, pulling his goggles down and his neckerchief up to stop the sand getting in his mouth, the breeze stirring it relentlessly. Tommy still isn't used to an environment that changes.

Eret smiles. "I like the goggles, Tommy. That was smart."

"Oh, yeah. Sam made them for me," Tommy says. "Thanks. So. Where is the guy?"

The portal is surrounded by an ornate archway, a path of sandstone leading to a massive structure in the distance. It's a pyramid, Tommy realizes. A fucking *huge* pyramid. Giant pillars and walls continue out from it, still under construction. There's a golden statue outside, facing the structure, a grey hood like a shark's head over it.

"Foolish!" Eret calls down the path.

The golden statue turns around, grinning.

Tommy stops.

"Tommy? You okay?" Eret looks back to him, puzzled.

Tommy stares. "Your... your buddy. He's, uh."

"What?"

"I dunno. *Two fucking storys tall.*"

"Oh," Eret turns back to look at Foolish, who waits for them, looking unsure. "Yeah. I guess he is."

"And *gold.*"

"Uh," Eret glances from Foolish back to him again. "Yep. He, uh. He probably won't be that tall when we talk to him. He's just... you know, working. If you're not comfortable meeting him, Tommy, that's okay."

“I’m not *scared*,” Tommy blusters. “Just– Just *surprised* is all. Wait– What the fuck do you mean he won’t be as tall when we talk to him?”

“Er, best if you just see, you know?” Eret smiles weakly.

Tommy glances skeptically between the two of them, but he follows Eret down the path. Tommy is slightly less surprised this time when Foolish goes to meet them in the middle and by the time they’re face to face, he’s no taller than Eret. Still, broad shouldered and shimmering gold, but slightly less daunting, if he ignores the unsettling paranormal implications.

“Uh, hi!” Foolish waves. It takes one word out of his mouth for the rest of Tommy’s tension to fade considerably. His voice is lighter than he might’ve expected from a demigod.

“You’re Tommy!”

“And you’re... Foolish,” Tommy says, sounding perhaps a bit too scathing when he says his name.

“Yeah! Yeah, Eret has... mentioned you,” Foolish is still smiling, but he’s definitely hiding his awkwardness.

“Oh yeah? What bits?” Tommy scowls. “How fucked up I am or how annoying?”

Foolish’s eyes widen and he looks to Eret for help. “...No. They said you wanted to ask me some stuff about undying?” Foolish’s voice grows more strained, a nervous laugh finishing his sentence.

“Yeah, that’s right, Foolish. I don’t want to make any assumptions, but from what you’ve said, I think you might be able to help, see...” Eret pauses, looking to Tommy. “Do you want to explain?”

Tommy shrugs. “You can. I don’t care.”

“See, Tommy is trying to get his brother back,” Eret says it slow and solemn in that deep voice of theirs, and the subject denotes a grave tone, of course, but Tommy can’t help but feel touched at how personally Eret seems to take this. “He... he died when he shouldn’t have, and we know resurrection is possible, all we need is a way to accomplish it.”

Foolish inhales through his teeth, grimacing. “Yeah... yeah it’s *possible*,” just from his tone Tommy feels disappointment creeping in. “I think you’ve got the wrong guy, fellas, I... I can’t do that stuff anymore. I don’t have that kind of power here. I have... hardly *any* power, actually,” he says more bitterly. “Besides, my thing was really like *totems*. How those work, you know? It *prevents* dying. You know, *un* dying, not *undo* dying,” another nervous laugh.

“Foolish, I didn’t expect you to just... raise the dead, but I thought maybe...” Eret hesitates. “Tommy, you said you had a bunch of books and things about all of this, right?”

“Yeah, yeah I do. If I– If I gave you what I have, you could– Fuck, I dunno–” Tommy is scrambling now.

“Books? You have a book?” Foolish looks surprised. “Well, yeah! That’ll do the job just fine!”

Tommy feels like his chest his being squeezed painfully tight. “No. No, we don’t *have* a revive book.” Tommy says dully. “Wait–” He shakes his head, hope persisting without mercy. “But– Dream *made* revive books. He wrote them *himself*. Could you write one?” He takes a step forward, looking up at Foolish with grim determination, almost accusing him.

Foolish steps back, hands raised passively. “Look, man, I wish I could, but that’s outside my area. I made *totems*, not books. It sounds like it was the work of another god, okay? Even if I still had power like that, can’t– can’t *mix ingredients* like that, you know? Copyright issues and stuff,” Foolish keeps his tone light, even as his discomfort persists. He could probably knock Tommy over with a poke, and he seems utterly averse to confrontation with the kid.

Tommy feels his irritation rising alongside his desperation. “Then what’s the fucking point of you?!” He snarls.

“Jeez, man,” Foolish steps back further, looking offended.

“Tommy, please, I know this is hard–” Eret is gentle. Tommy doesn’t care.

“No– I thought– If you’re a god why can’t you *do* something about it?!” Tommy’s voice breaks. The pain of hope immediately refuted.

Foolish is looking all the more startled, but he doesn’t get defensive, he doesn’t argue or look to Eret for help. “Look, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to do anything, I mean, I *know* I can’t do anything, but... maybe I can help *you* do something. If there’s anything I can do to help,” Foolish glances to Eret. “A friend of Eret’s is a friend of mine, okay?”

Tommy doesn’t know what to do with his kindness. His anger is traded for something weaker in an instant. “I’m sorry I shouted at you,” his voice still shakes.

“Eh,” Foolish brushes it off lightly. “You’re under a lot of *stress*, you know?”

“Yeah, understatement of the year, *pal*, ” Tommy mutters. “Would you come look at what I have? Some of the books I can’t read, and my buddy Ranboo, he can do some of the rune stuff, but there’s shit that...” Tommy eyes the towering pyramid on the horizon. “...might actually be right up your alley, aye?”

“Yeah! Yeah, totally. I can take a stab at the ol’ translating tablet, or whatever the case may be,” Foolish stretches, rolling his shoulders back. “I need a break from all this anyway. Keep my nose to the grindstone too long, I start to go a little stir crazy!”

“You might want to put on something warmer, Foolish, Tommy is staying in Snowchester,” Eret points out.

Foolish looks surprised with them. “Come on, Eret, you know I don’t bother with all that *temperature* stuff.”

“I– I do?” Eret looks puzzled.

“I mean, okay, *except* for that time I got all chilly from the Wither effect stuff, but that’s *different*,” Foolish admits, shrugging. “But that does *not* apply here. I wouldn’t have even known all the weird shakes I was getting was ‘cause I was *cold* if you hadn’t explained it to me!” Foolish continues to chat as he follows the two of them towards the portal.

“...Right,” Eret replies with far less confidence, but they don’t correct him.

“You don’t feel temperature?” Tommy asks with a frown as the volcanic heat of the Nether replaces the desert once more.

“Nope!”

“D’you feel other stuff? Like, do you still get hungry?”

“Yeah. I still gotta eat. And sleep and all that good stuff.”

“What about pain? Do you feel pain?”

Foolish’s smile falters for a moment, attempting to force his reply into that same cheerful tone with mixed success. “Y-Yeah. Yeah, I still feel pain.”

“Huh,” Tommy does not elaborate, but Foolish’s reply made some of his potential jealousy fade. “Is it... Is it rude if I ask if you can die?” Only now does Tommy think through the appropriate behavior at present, although hardly so as he asks anyway.

“W-Well, I don’t know about *rude*, but to answer your question, uh, so far so good, y’know?” Foolish nods.

“So you don’t know?”

“Uhhh,” Foolish looks to Eret with a clear cry for help.

“Might be inching closer to rude, there, Tommy,” Eret says.

“Fair enough.”

It’s a short journey back to the main portal, the real trip being across the land, as Snowchester deliberately didn’t have a Nether portal, but they’re back at Tubbo’s cabin before the silence gets too unbearably awkward.

“Alright, so what’re we workin’ with here?” Foolish rubs his hands together as he sees the books Tommy has left strewn across the floor.

“These are the ones I can’t read,” Tommy points to the separate pile he had marked off.



“Gotcha, gotcha,” Foolish settles in on the floor, grabbing one. “Ohhh yeah, you’d have no shot reading stuff like this, it’s *old*. Like, as old as me old. Wonder how this Dream guy translated it?”

“Maybe he didn’t. He could’ve just kept them in the hopes of *eventually* translating them, couldn’t he?” Eret sits beside Foolish, reaching for a book outside of the pile of dead languages.

“But you *can* read it?”

“Ehhh,” Foolish says noncommittally. “My, uh, my sumerian is a *little* rusty, I’ll admit! But I’ll have a better shot with that than with some of the more... *foreign* stuff,” he nods to one of the books that Ranboo had been able to read.

“Yeah, actually, a buddy of mine could translate some of that stuff. He’s got memory problems, so, he doesn’t remember where he learned it. Do you know what it is?” Tommy asks. “It’s the same script as enchantments, right? I dunno where enchanting stuff came from, I guess. The Nether?”

Foolish hesitates. “I mean, yeah, it’s the same script as enchantments, but it’s not from the Nether. Or... anywhere you’ve been. Or anywhere *I’ve* been, actually. At least not here.”

Tommy nods, feigning understanding.

“Yep,” Foolish sets aside his current choice in book. “You know, Tommy, I don’t think these books are gonna be able to do much. Not without something more powerful.”

Tommy frowns. “What do you mean more powerful?”

Foolish seems to debate something for a moment, before he tosses this book aside as well. “Look, man, what you really need is to find the god who gave the book to Dream, okay? That’ll be your best bet.”

“That’s– That’s *no* bet!” Tommy snaps. “I have no fucking clue how he got this shit! You’re the fucking *demigod*, what’re your connections, then?!”

“Dude, you gotta change your perception of demigods, alright? I’m just some guy who used to do some stuff and it didn’t carry over to this server,” Foolish is less patient this time.

Tommy sighs, rubbing his eyes furiously. His head pounds. “So– So you really don’t think there’s a way to... to puzzle it out?”

“Revival? Not correctly, at least. There’s some shadier stuff with necromancy, but odds are you aren’t gonna get back who you want and instead you’ll end up like, possessed or something,” Foolish shrugs, like his explanation was something casual and not the potential for existential horror.

“So... So whatever other ways there are to bring back the dead, they’re just gonna fuck things up?”

“Yeah, yeah you could put it that way.”

“And the only thing you think will work, is *finding the god who gave Dream the book*? Finding the god who helped the shadiest motherfucker on the planet? That god?”

“Ha. I mean, when you put it like that,” Foolish looks almost embarrassed.

Tommy just nods, not really paying attention, lost in thought. He’s running out of options. Eret had offered him a potential savior and all it has led to is more closed doors.

“Isn’t... Callahan sort of a god? And I think Bad is in touch with the gods too, like. More than most people, at least,” Foolish offers.

Tommy blinks, surprised. “Callahan. He’s... holy shit. I guess Bad too, but Callahan is more *mysterious* so he probably knows shit, right?” Tommy looks to Eret and Foolish for confirmation.

“I think talking to them could be smart,” Eret agrees. “Bad... isn’t a god, but he’s connected to *something*. But lately he’s been... a bit wrapped up in that Egg thing.”

“Egg thing?” Tommy frowns.

“Yeah. Those red vines spreading out from the spider farm? That’s from the Egg,” Eret explains.

“Red vines..?”

“Have you not..?” Eret trails off, puzzled.

“I haven't gotten out much,” Tommy mutters. “But sounds like I won’t bother Bad with this shit, then. But Callahan... and— Okay, *Connor* saw Dream revive me. I dunno if he knows shit, but that’s something, right?”

“Connor? Uh, what?” Eret looks surprised. “*Connor?*”

“Yeah. He felt really bad about it. Because he didn’t stop us, but, I mean. I left with Dream willingly, so. How’s he supposed to know Dream was threatening to kill me and shit, y’know?” Tommy shrugs.

Foolish looks to Eret with wide, incredulous eyes. Eret gives the slightest of head shakes, a subtler way to tell Foolish *leave it*. Tommy pretends not to notice, but he’s actually comforted by it. It means Eret really hadn’t gone and vented his sob story to Foolish. That means something, in some strange way.

“So... So I’m gonna talk to Callahan, then. And then Connor. And then... Yeah,” Tommy nods like that settles the matter. “Thanks, Foolish.”

“Thanks—? What did I do?” Foolish asks.

Tommy thinks on that for a moment. “I guess you’re right. Never mind, then. Thanks for nothing.”

Foolish sputters wordlessly.

“Hey, I’m *kidding*. Shit, man,” Tommy raises an eyebrow at him, almost looking pitying. “I said thanks and I meant it, alright?”

“Oh. Okay,” Foolish tries to take it in stride.

“And, er, sorry if I... made assumptions or whatever. Put too many expectations on you and shit,” Tommy says reluctantly. “Honestly, my experience with gods— I mean, false gods, really has been a bit shit. At least you’re a decent guy, Foolish. I mean, I would’ve preferred a *real* god that’s decent, but I don’t think those exist, y’know?”

Foolish goes from looking understanding to grumpy the longer Tommy talks. “I— I’m *not* a false god.”

Tommy looks as if he wants to make another more biting comment, but he holds back, still, his knowing smirk is bruising enough.

“I’m not...” Foolish says bitterly, but he sits back, yielding.

“Do you want me to come with you to talk to Callahan, Tommy?” Eret changes the subject.

“I gotta *ask* him if he’ll even talk to me. Or. Write to me. Sign to me?” Tommy shrugs. “I dunno. Feels like a conversation not to have just by typing in chat, though, y’know?”

Tommy reaches out to Callahan later that evening, long after Foolish and Eret had left. Tubbo and Ranboo had returned to the house and Tommy had filled them in.

“So, wait, Foolish is a... god of undying, but he can’t... *do* anything?” Ranboo asks.

“Yeah, apparently he can’t do fuck all on this server,” Tommy rolls his eyes. “Nice guy, though.”

“And Callahan is going to help? I don’t know if this Foolish guy knows much about gods here. Like, Prime can’t do anything like this, this isn’t what Prime is *for*,” Tubbo points out.

“Fuck if I know,” Tommy shrugs. “I mean, Callahan has got some godly shit going on with him, don’t he? If I could reach the gods easier, I fuckin’ would, but it’s not like I’ve got Drista on speed dial, is it?”

Tommy looks down at his communicator.

<Callahan> *I can talk to you whenever. I know where you are*

<TommyInnit> *ominously put but okay. Sooner is better than later*

<Callahan> *I’m outside*

<TommyInnit> *holy shit*

“He’s... here,” Tommy stares down at his comm, surprised.

“Already?” Tubbo frowns, opening his front door. Callahan stands on the porch, looking out on the bay with muted interest. “Oh, hey, Callahan, come on in,” Tubbo tries to hide his surprise.

Callahan nods in thanks, stepping out of the snow, looking around the cabin with an unreadable expression.

*You wanted to talk to me about gods,* Callahan signs.

Tommy’s sign language is a little rusty, but after a second, he catches up. “Er, yeah. So. I need the book to get Wilbur back. The revive book?”

Callahan nods.

“And someone said best way to do that is to find whatever god gave it to Dream. And you... know god stuff. Server stuff. Right?” Tommy is hesitant.

Callahan frowns, nodding slowly. *I do. Dream might have gotten the book from...* Callahan traces an open smile over his mouth, before drawing an X over his eyes. *From XD.*

“Yeah, yeah I thought that might’ve been it. Do you know how to... contact XD?” Tommy asks. He sounds hopeless. He sounds desperate. He knows it’s because he is. He’s had enough let downs lately. He needs a win.

Callahan’s eyes widen and he quickly shakes his head, signs coming out faster now so it’s harder for Tommy to follow. *Do not try to find XD. It will go badly.*

“Yeah, well, my life is already going pretty fucking badly, Callahan, how much worse can it get?!” Tommy snaps.

Callahan doesn’t get mad, he just gives Tommy this look, not quite pitying, more so *I know you’re better than that.*

“I just—” Tommy tries to calm with a deep sigh. “Why? Please, if you know a way, it’s my risk to take—”

“Tommy, if Callahan says it’s a bad idea—”

“You can hush,” Tommy snaps at Tubbo. “It’s my decision.”

Tubbo falls silent, looking offended. Tommy turns back to Callahan.

*If I could I don’t know if I would tell you. The odds of XD doing something good are way lower than the odds of him doing something really bad to you for fun. You know how bad that can be.*

It's harder for Tommy to read, but Callahan's confidence in his sign makes Tommy wonder if maybe Callahan is speaking— or rather not speaking— from experience.

“O-Okay,” Tommy's voice shakes as he feels a lump in his throat. “Then what— What am I supposed to *do*? If I can't talk to XD, a-and if he's— *fucking hell*, Callahan, can't you tell I *need* this shit to work?!”

Callahan pauses to think for a moment, but when he next signs it's with a certainty Tommy almost trusts. *Wait. We will find Dream. Then you will get your brother back.*

Tommy doesn't know what to say. He's so tired of feeling helpless, he's so tired of being told to just *wait*, but it seems like yet again Dream is the only path available to him. He just nods. “Thanks for coming out here, Callahan.”

Callahan nods. *I mean it. We will get your brother back. We will catch Dream.*

Tommy manages a smile no one really believes and another nod. Callahan looks to each of them, gives a small wave, and heads back out the door. It had been a painfully short and unfruitful conversation.

Tommy is so tired.

“I'm going to bed. And tomorrow I'm gonna track down Connor.”

“We'll go with you,” Ranboo offers.

“Yeah, fine,” Tommy waves him off, falling face first onto his bed. He wishes he didn't have to share a room with Tubbo and Ranboo so he could cry without someone trying to comfort him. He doesn't *need* comfort right now. He needs a plan.

~

Tommy hasn't been staying in his own home, but it has stayed empty, Connor having enough respect to leave when he wasn't wanted there. Instead, he's rebuilt his home across from Tommy's old guard tower. Although, at this particular moment Connor is not in his own home. He's in Tommy's garden.

The man nearly jumps out of his skin when he looks up to see the home owner watching him skeptically.

“Whoa! H-Hey man! What're you— What're you doing around here? Thought you... Thought you moved to Snowtown or whatever,” Connor bounces back on his heels, glancing across the street to his new house with the clear intent to disappear as soon as possible.

“I'm not gonna get on you about stealing carrots. Just— replant after, will you?” Tommy raises an eyebrow at him. “You're all... *skittish*. You can't be nervous 'cause of me, are you?”

“W-Well,” Connor meanders onto the prime path, but the trio blocks the most direct path back to his home. “Uh, to be honest, I thought you probably wouldn't want to see me. I still

feel bad about that stuff and I thought... the smart thing was to leave you alone.”

“You keep on saying you’re sorry about things, Connor,” Tommy scoffs. “I get it, you saw some shit and you didn’t tell anyone, but it’s not like I asked for help, eh?”

“Well, Tommy, he should’ve—” Tubbo cuts in with a far less calm tone, arms folded over his chest as he watches Connor with a scathing gaze.

“Tubbo, are you *really* going to get on someone else about not helping me?” Tommy’s tone turns on a dime. For the first time real anger shines through, and it’s not directed at Connor. “*Really?*”

Tubbo’s eyes widen as he stammers wordlessly, until finally, he falls silent, jaw tense as he reorders his thoughts, a storm stirring behind his eyes. “I’m gonna take a walk.” He turns and disappears down the prime path, axe held tightly at his side. Ranboo looks torn, staring between Tommy and Tubbo.

Tommy pretends he doesn’t feel guilty as he turns back to Connor. He also pretends he isn’t listening carefully to see if Ranboo is going to leave him defenseless. He stays.

“Whoa, brrr,” Connor feigns a shiver. “A little chilly over here, huh?”

“Shut up, Connor,” Tommy snaps. “Just because I can’t *actually* blame you for it doesn’t mean you get to say shit. Okay? I’ve got questions for you.”

Connor raises his hands passively, “okay, okay fine, whatever you want.”

“Right,” Tommy nods, frowning as he tries to figure out how to ask. “You saw Dream revive me?”

Connor shakes his head. “No, I saw you *after* he’d revived you. I’m guessing right after from how freaked out you were.”

Tommy grows more puzzled. “No, that doesn’t make sense. You *knew* he’d revived me. How’d you know that if you didn’t see it?”

“Uhhh. Tommy,” Connor raises an eyebrow at him, bemused and skeptical. “You were dead before, and then you weren’t. I think Dream reviving you would be sorta obvious at that point.”

“Fuckin’ *what?*” Tommy sputtered. “That’s— *You assumed Dream fucking cured death* before considering if I’d... I dunno, fuckin’ faked dying or some shit?”

Connor looks equally confused. “I saw Dream with you. And everyone seemed pretty sure you were dead. If there hadn’t been a body— one that was, like, definitely you— I knew Tubbo wouldn’t have believed it, so. Yeah. That made more sense. What’re you getting at, Tommy?”

“Bringing people back from the dead— That isn’t— that *wasn’t* possible, Connor. How the fuck would you treat that as a logical conclusion?” Tommy asks sharply. He tries to ignore

what Connor had said about Tubbo.

“Uh, why *wouldn't* it be possible?” Connor is still acting with utter confidence as if he's the ordinary one in this situation.

Tommy's mild irritation is overshadowed by hope. “What do you know about revival, Connor?” Tommy steps closer, voice calmer, more calculating. Tommy doesn't feel like himself.

Connor's eyes remain wide and unsure. “Nothing. Like, actually nothing,” he steps back. “I just made a— a logical jump! Right? Like, you weren't dead anymore, so, Dream must've done something about it!”

“You— You have to know fucking *something!*” Tommy is shouting now. “*How* can you have said all this shit— How can you have not seen anything? How can you not *know?!?*” Before Tommy can stop himself, he shoves Connor back, hard enough that he hits the ground.

Tommy freezes, the tension in the air turns electric. He feels Ranboo put a steady hand on his shoulder, holding him back, but Tommy doesn't try to take another step. He can't move. All he can do is focus on the rapid rise and fall of his chest, on the figure at his feet, on the way it felt to slam against Connor's chest and to know the feeling of the wind being knocked out of his lungs from the other side of things.

“What the fuck, man?!” Connor says incredulously, coughing as his breath returns to him, he stays on the ground a moment, sitting up sorely, rubbing his arms where he'd reached back to catch himself. “Why'd you do that— Jeez, I know I didn't help you, if you wanna fight about it, at least give me some fair warning or whatever,” Connor gets to his feet, brushing dirt off of his onesie. “I dunno, actually! I don't wanna fight you! I mean, I guess that wasn't supposed to start a fight, but still, not a fan...”

Tommy still doesn't say anything. He feels sick. *You got him on the ground. Then you're supposed to kick him in the ribs. Then when he's gasping for breath you kick him in the face, and now that you know he's listening, you pick him up and slam him into the wall. You tell him what you want and he will obey. He'll do anything to make you stop—*

“F-Fuck—” Tommy inhales shakily. “I'm sorry— I am— fucking hell, Connor, I am so sorry, I—I—” Tommy pulls away from Ranboo, but he doesn't step closer to Connor, he moves away. “I'm sorry—” Tommy turns from both of them. He wants to run. He can't run anymore. Still, he makes his way down the prime path at the best pace he can manage.

*That's how it goes, doesn't it? Why else would you have done it? Why else would you have started to hurt him? You know what that hurting can get someone. You would've gotten what you wanted. You should've kept going.*

That voice in his head is awfully familiar. Tommy feels like there's an accusation bearing down on him, he knows Ranboo stayed behind, he looked around and saw no one behind him, but Tommy still wishes so badly that he could run, like any of this had ever been something he could run away from. Still, he feels its desperate pull in his chest. He *can* run. But it will hurt. He doesn't care anymore.

Tommy collapses the moment he crosses the threshold of church prime. It hadn't been his destination, but it had been somewhere to flee to as his feeble strength began to fail him. Tommy is on his knees, gasping for breath in front of the font of holy water.

"Tommy?"

Tommy jumps, scrambling to his feet and in the process getting soaked by the fountain. "What the fuck, Tubbo?!" Tommy continues to stumble back until he hits one of the pews.

"Sorry! Sorry, I— I saw you run in here— Where's Ranboo?" Tubbo puts his axe back in his belt, careful to keep his distance.

"H-He's fine— He's fine, he's back with Connor," Tommy brushes back his soaked hair. At least the water sort of snapped him out of his daze.

"And— And what're you doing here?" Tubbo grows more puzzled. He doesn't seem angry, but now that Tommy is no longer startled, that tension returns, both of them wired like a spring.

"What am *I* doing here— what're *you* doing here?" Is Tommy's retort. It's weak, defensive.

"I was— I said I was taking a walk, and then I saw you," Tubbo's response is perfectly reasonable.

Tommy grows more bitter, arms folded over his chest as he slouches back against the pew. He wants to say something harsh, he wants to storm out, he wants Tubbo to feel bad.

"I hurt Connor."

"You..." Tubbo stares, like it won't compute. "What did you do, Tommy?" Tubbo asks, every word weighted with dread.

"Nothing too bad, but I still did," Tommy says quickly.

"What was it?" Tubbo is far from reassured.

Tommy sighs, sinking further into himself. He's ashamed and scared and so tired of all of this. He hates it. He especially hates that nagging question wondering if Dream would praise him for something like this. Tommy buries the thought and forces out his confession. "I... I pushed him."

The tension leaves Tubbo's expression immediately, it softening into relief and then something more amused. A smile twitches in the corner of Tubbo's mouth. "You *pushed* him?"

Tommy doesn't follow, hands balled into fists, anger like a snake coiled inside of his chest. "I knew you wouldn't fucking get it..."

"I thought you were gonna tell me you— You pushed him off a cliff or something, I dunno!" Tubbo can't hold back a nervous laugh.



“You– This is fucking serious, man!” Tommy gets back on his feet, pacing the length of the church, stopping in front of the altar and burying his face in his hands. “I *hurt* him like it was easy,” he says far more softly. He doesn’t know if Tubbo heard him. He looks up at the bell gleaming on the table. He doesn’t know if anyone heard him.

“Tommy...” Tubbo’s concern returns.

“It was like I saw him on the ground, and I was all caught up in my own brain telling me shit like, what makes me different? Why’d I fucking stop, eh? I could’ve gotten what I wanted, but I started it, how did I fucking stop it? Because h-he–” Tommy’s voice breaks. He feels a lump in his throat, vision blurred by tears that refuse to stay bottled. “He never stopped, Tubbo,” he can only speak in a shaky whisper, but Tubbo joins him in front of the altar. He’s listening. “He never stopped. F-Fuck–” Tommy doesn’t know if he can do this. Any of it. He’s just so *tired*. “I don’t know how to– to draw that *line* anymore, Tubbo. Back before... before all of this, I did damage, okay? I know I did. Not just burning down George’s house. I was so *careless* sometimes, but... Haven’t I paid for it? For all of it? I... I don’t want to hurt anybody, but I miss when... when it didn’t cost so much to fuck up.”

“We were all careless before the war, Tommy. And other times you cared too much. You’re good at caring,” Tubbo hesitates for a moment. He puts his hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, I... I didn’t think about it. I shouldn’t have laughed.”

“It’s okay. I probably would’ve laughed too if I wasn’t all fucked up about this stuff,” Tommy shrugs, but he doesn’t brush Tubbo off. “I’m sorry that I’m angry with you,” Tommy says softly.

“It’s alright.”

“No it isn’t,” Tommy sighs. “I know– logically, I *know* you were fuckin’ pushed and it got really bad, but it’s like my brain gets all fogged up and cloudy so the only bits I can see are you...” Tommy doesn’t want to say it. *Calling me a liability. Calling me a danger to L’Manberg. Telling Dream to escort me out.*

“I know why you’re angry, Tommy. And I wish I could fix it a-and I think I’m trying? I dunno. I’m... I’m trying to be the best friend I should’ve been then. And that’s– That’s not an excuse, but...” Tubbo sighs. He feels old. “I wish you weren’t angry too.”

Tommy nods, still staring at the stained glass, mind wandering, not really focusing on what he’s seeing. “I’m getting worse, you know.”

Tubbo wants to lie. He wants to pretend he hasn’t noticed it, but he has. Tommy had, for a very brief, peaceful moment, made something like progress. Ever since he got his hands on that journal, he’s been slipping backwards. He doesn’t eat unless asked, he doesn’t go outside, and he’s quick to anger. Tubbo cannot lie to him. “You’re not stuck like this. You can still get better.”

Tommy laughs softly. “Right...”

“I mean it, Tommy. You’ve already done so much, man. That matters,” Tubbo pushes, stepping closer so their shoulders touch.

“I don’t know how to do that when I’m chasing someone who’s gone, Tubbo,” Tommy speaks without thinking. He wishes he hadn’t the moment he does. He steps away from Tubbo, going to the front pew, burying his head in his hands. He doesn’t cry. The weight on his shoulders, on his chest, it’s beyond tears. “N-No– He’s not gone, he’s *not*, s-so it’s not that–” He stammers. “I’m just so fucking *helpless*. Even now, Dream is still out there holding him over me and I don’t know how much more of this I can take, Tubbo. I just– I just want my fucking brother back. Haven’t I earned at least that? Don’t I deserve fucking *something* for– for all this hell? I get that there wasn’t a point to *any* of it, I get that now, it was just pain, but there’s got to be *something*, Tubbo. I told Wil– I told him we were getting out of there *together*. S-So…” Tommy takes a shaky breath. “How can I leave him?”

Tubbo wants to offer reassurances. He wants to promise Tommy something that he can’t give. He cannot lie to him. Tubbo puts his arm around Tommy’s shoulder, letting Tommy lean against him. “I’m so sorry, Tommy.”

“Me too,” Tommy says, bitterness still festering inside of him like an infected wound. “I can’t do anything, so where am I supposed to put it?”

“What?”

“This… This anger. It’s eating me up. I dunno what’s gonna be left.”

“So put it somewhere else.”

Tommy looks at him, puzzled.

“So… how bad to you *actually* feel about pushing Connor?” Tubbo’s eyes gleam with a mischief Tommy had almost forgotten.

“Well, maybe not as bad as him like, being all cagey and shit about seeing me brought back,” Tommy grins.

“And he didn’t come on the rescue mission! He’s a dick!” Tubbo stood, offering Tommy a hand. “So, what do we do about that, Tommy?”

Tommy tilted his head, like he’s mulling it over. “He’s got that sad little house. I think he should go back to living in mine and paying me rent.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tommy looks like trouble. Tubbo wouldn’t have it any other way. “We’ve just got to… incentivize him a bit.”

“Hey hey hey whoa stop!” Connor leaves Tommy’s garden and runs towards his new home, but he’s more than too late. The sad little wooden home is already burning.

“Yeah, bitch!” Tommy laughs. “You’re fuckin’ homeless!”

“Oh my god,” Connor doesn’t try to get water. He just stares helplessly at the blaze. “Why’d you...” He doesn’t bother finishing the question, just sits back on the edge of the prime path and watches it burn. Ranboo offers no help nor any criticism to his two friends, just awkwardly pats him on the shoulder.

Tubbo had missed Tommy’s laugh, that wheezing cackle that always meant running a little wild. Tommy changes almost too quickly, like that petrified drive that had kept him barely functioning is just gone. Tommy doesn’t look scared, he stares at the fire and he looks alive, in the flickering orange light, he almost looks like the boy Tubbo remembers from far too long ago.

Tubbo isn’t so sure, but he thinks this might be something like progress.

Tommy watches the house burn and doesn’t concern himself with consequences. Thinking back on these past days, desperate attempts as he begs every being he can for help, as he searches for something that it seems more and more likely isn’t there, as he fights tooth and nail to scrap together something like faith that Wilbur is coming back home. In this moment, it’s like something as shifted inside of him. He’s not fighting anymore. And maybe that’s something like peace. It feels something like giving up too.

## Chapter End Notes

hah. I apologize for just hitting y'all with one dead end after another, but I stand by my promise. I've just got... plans I want to get to before that happens. Hope the interpersonal conflict stuff is still holding your interest. As I've said, it's slow recovery from here on out!

And, while I feel a little bad for Connor, I really wanted Tommy to burn down another house lmao. Him being able to do that without fear, it's like coming full circle, y'know? :')

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

!!!! CW: themes of suicide!

Okay. I said a long time ago, there was the calm before the storm, and then there was the storm.

This is more like the dark before the dawn.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hi, Tommy!”

“Oh, hey, Ghostbur.”

Ghostbur drifts around the platform beside him. “You’re in L’Manberg!”

“Er, yeah. I am.”

“I feel like you don’t come here very often,” Ghostbur makes an astute observation.

“Especially without Tubbo.”

Tommy feels a pang of irritation, but he doesn’t snap at Ghostbur, or leave him. “I guess. I’m here now, though.”

“Good!” Ghostbur smiles. He doesn’t look like Wilbur when he smiles. “Do you remember when we were on vacation? I got to spend time with you every day, Tommy!”

Tommy’s nails dig into his palm, but he settles. He knows Ghostbur doesn’t mean anything by it. He doesn’t know any better. Hurts either way. Ghostbur is right, though. This is a change. Tommy had walked to New L’Manberg alone, he told Tubbo where he was going, and he left. Without armor or a guard beside him. He still has an axe handy, of course, but Tommy hasn’t felt this... *light* in a long time.

Maybe it means Tommy is getting better. He’s becoming brave again. Tommy goes outside on his own, he meanders through the snow alone and without terror. He no longer confines himself to Tubbo’s basement and the protection offered by the stasis chambers. Tommy is always sure to message Tubbo, so he doesn’t panic if returning to an empty house, but he doesn’t cling to him like he had in his first weeks back. Now, he explores New L’Manberg, taking the time to speak with Ghostbur.

“I’d rather focus on the present, Ghostbur,” is all Tommy can bring himself to say.

“Okay, Tommy! What’re we doing today? Do you still need help finding that book?” Ghostbur drifts through the empty stalls. Tommy doesn’t know why there’s a market when there’s no one left, but Ghostbur seems to find it interesting enough.

“No, I don’t,” Tommy remembers he’s probably expected to reply. He heads uphill, toward Ghostbur’s home but not. “Actually, Ghostbur, I was gonna take a look at Fundy’s place here.”

“Oh, I know Fundy! My son!” Ghostbur says excitedly, drifting ahead up the hill to where Fundy’s home rests in slight disrepair. “He lives here?”

“You don’t know?” Tommy frowns.

“Hm,” Ghostbur mulls it over. “I don’t remember, actually! I…” Ghostbur stops, staring at the walls a little aimlessly. “I don’t know where Fundy is. Hm.”

Tommy feels a strange sort of ache in his chest. “It’s— It’s alright, Ghostbur. He’s in the desert I think. I could— I mean, I was gonna ask about having his house, so, I could ask him where he is now too.”

“Okay, Tommy!” Ghostbur continues on happily, going through Fundy’s old chests. He speaks of loss and he doesn’t know it. He forgets but Tommy knows Wilbur doesn’t. So he’ll do as he said.

Tommy originally hadn’t planned on asking Fundy if he could have his house, just on moving in. He supposes he has to now.

**<TommyInnit> hey fox boy. Can i have ur old house in lmanberg?**

**<Fundy> yea sure man**

**<Fundy> oh my god**

**<Fundy> you’re alive???**

Tommy stares down at his comm, almost uncomprehending. A barking laugh rises before he’s even fully processed what he’s reading. Fundy hadn’t been a part of the rescue party, Tommy had known that, but he hadn’t thought that it meant Fundy didn’t know *any* of it.

**<TommyInnit> up for debate but sure. Guess i thought someone would have told u.**

**<Fundy> NO???**

**<Fundy> WAIT**

**<Fundy> I SAW UR BODY**

**<Fundy> I WAS AT YOUR FUNERAL**

**<Fundy> THIS IS SO MESSED UP WHOEVER IS MESSING WITH ME RN**

**<TommyInnit> DONT FUCKING SHOUT AT ME BITHC I KNOW IM ALIVE  
BETTER THAN U DO TE FUCK DO YOU KNOW ABUOT ANYTHING**

**<Fundy> Ok u sound like Tommy.**

**<TommyInnit> yeah Dream killed me alot but hes got a book to bring me back. Stay  
away if u see him he'll do something fucked up to u if he sees u out there all alone**

**<Fundy> Uh. Ok. Good to know**

**<Fundy> I am really fucking far from the mainlands right now otherwise I'd. come see  
you??? Idk what im supposed to do here.**

**<Fundy> Im glad you're not dead. Next time I'm around I'll come by. Promise.**

**<TommyInnit> ok thanks for the house**

Tommy sees Fundy's comm go offline. He had forgotten to ask where he was. For Ghostbur. Tommy looks up to where Ghostbur has meandered out of the half finished house and back towards his sewers, humming all the while. He supposes it doesn't matter. If he hadn't brought it up, Ghostbur wouldn't have thought of Fundy at all. He doubts Wilbur could focus in enough to have heard that conversation. Maybe when Fundy is actually here he'll be sure Ghostbur is there too so at least Wilbur can *see* his son. If that counts for anything.

Tommy doesn't follow Ghostbur toward the sewers yet, even if he plans on spending more time with the ghost. First he just stops, standing outside Fundy's old home and looking out over New L'Manberg. Tommy sighs. He still feels so weary. He *is* better though. Tommy scans the horizon offhandedly, feeling like he should be looking for Dream.

He's still scared of Dream coming after him. Terrified, actually. In the same breath he needs that monster to show. It's the only way he gets Wilbur back, that has become more and more painfully clear to him. So here he is, taking fewer precautions, wandering off alone, letting his guard down, tempting fate. He doesn't know what Dream is waiting for. Tommy is out in the open alone for hours at a time, what more can he do? Tommy almost wants to scream at him, *what more do you want from me?!*

But even after all of this he still hasn't gotten quite that desperate.

It's going to be a good day. He's going to try. Even if he's still waiting for the end to come to him, until then he's going to try anyway.

Tommy stops staring at the horizon. He heads toward the sewers.

"Oh, hello, Tommy!" Ghostbur seems surprised to see him. "Did you need something?"

"No, Ghostbur," Tommy doesn't like that Ghostbur doesn't understand why Tommy is there. It makes Tommy feel as if he's failed somehow. He'd wanted to be around Ghostbur more, for Wilbur's sake, but the fact of the matter it just hurts. He can only take so much time looking at his brother's shadow. "I... I wanted to hang out. Y'know, like old times, eh?"

“Oh, sure, Tommy! Like... like what?” Ghostbur tilts his head at him curiously.

Tommy pauses. Ghostbur’s home still feels stuffy, the heat of the fire almost too much to bear, and the outside room with the brewing stands are just as bad if not worse. The scent of burning blaze powder makes Tommy think of wounds needing to be healed.

Wilbur was the one with a plan, with the crazy scheme and task for Tommy to follow. Tommy has ideas of his own, always of course, but it’s just one more reminder of how different Ghostbur is to what Tommy really longs for.

“I was... I was thinking we could...” Tommy *does* have an idea. It hurts to think about, both from fear and wanting. “You... You still have y— You still have Wil’s guitar, right?”

Ghostbur stares at him blankly.

“You... you can’t have *lost* it, like— Where could it have gone if you don’t have it?” Tommy pushes on insistently. “Please try to remember, Ghostbur, this is important.”

Ghostbur frowns, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Tommy,” he says so meekly. “I really don’t remember. I remember lots of happy memories with the guitar, but they... they fade out and get sort of fuzzy at the ravine, I’m afraid.”

Tommy feels a spark of anger in his chest. He has no fair target to give it to so it dies just as quickly. “That’s... that’s alright, Ghostbur.” Tommy tries to think back. It’s so long, but as Ghostbur had implied, there’s only one logical place for the guitar to have been left. Pogtopia.

When Tommy had snuck back into Manberg, reconvened with Tubbo, he had gotten the essentials. That meant tools, weapons, an enderchest, and first and foremost, Wilbur’s guitar. Tommy can’t remember if Wilbur ever played it there, or if it remained leaning against the wall beside his bed.

He must have played it once. In the early days, before they both got so wounded.

No. From day one Wilbur had changed. Changed so much the guitar had no longer been a part of the picture. Still, that’s surely where it remained.

“Do you...” Tommy hesitates. Maybe taking Ghostbur, and according to Tommy therefore Wilbur, back there was a bad idea. He needs something to do. Wilbur is currently surviving limbo, he can tolerate a glimpse of a ravine, whatever memories it may hold. “Would you come with me, Ghostbur? On a trip? I want to go get something.”

“Okay, Tommy! Where are we going?” Ghostbur joins him by the door, far too trusting.

“You’ll see, Ghostbur. I don’t think it’s a place you’ll remember,” Tommy remembers the way. He remembers where the half finished railway starts, descending deep under ground. Ghostbur doesn’t comment on the scenery, he doesn’t acknowledge it as anything familiar. Tommy does his best not to overthink that. Was all of them, united to take down Schlatt,

*finally* so unalone, charging out of the dark and into a rising sun, was that not *happy* to Wilbur?

*Clearly not happy enough. He tried to blow himself up before the day was done.*

Tommy just keeps walking. This would be a good spot for Dream to grab him, he thinks dully. He's out in the open, above the treeline, he wouldn't see anyone until they were right on top of him. He's out in the middle of nowhere, no witnesses, and if Dream wants to hurt him then and there it would be easy to drag him down into Pogtopia.

Tommy doesn't stop. He keeps walking at a slow, tedious pace even with his cane, he moves further from the mainlands down this familiar track and now into the tunnels.

"Oh, I think I've been here, Tommy!" Ghostbur says, his voice echoing even more than usual off of the tunnel walls.

"You have, Ghostbur," Tommy says dully. "Wilbur and me lived here."

"No, not Alivebur, Tommy. *I* have been here!"

Tommy turns back to look at him. "You have? Why?"

Ghostbur stares at the walls. They're reaching the part of the tunnel covered in buttons now. "I can't really remember."

Tommy sighs. "Of course you can't." Tommy takes a few more steps and is struck by the profound feeling that he never should have come here.

The lights have gone out. The buttons remain. Tommy had once thought the buttons were from Wilbur. Months in the dark, he had instead been told that Wilbur had no idea how the buttons had gotten there. Tommy doesn't understand it. It's *him*, isn't it? Wilbur's descent plastered on the walls like a child drawing where they shouldn't, desperate for attention, just one more cry for help Tommy failed to save him from. It wasn't him. That doesn't mean they didn't mock his brother's plan for a grandiose, self inflicted martyrdom. The buttons remain even as the lights have gone out and this place has sat in empty silence for so long, they cover every surface like a plague or an infection. Even the ground is tainted by it, a minefield of paranoia rather than reality.

Tommy is quick to move past them, back to the divot in the wall that opened up to what constituted a bedroom for them both. Tommy puts a new, lit torch in a sconce on the wall. It makes the room almost cozier. It had never been a very comforting place to sleep or lose sleep in, but it had been something. Plain stone walls, their beds shoved in opposing corners, no door, just open into the air of the ravine. It had gotten cold at night. Tommy remembers that well. He remembers the sound of Wilbur getting out of bed at odd hours just to pace.

There it is.

Tommy was right. Wilbur's guitar case sits, innocent and passive, beside Wilbur's old bed. Surely the damp must have gotten to it by now, even in the case it must be damaged—



No. It isn't. Tommy sits on the edge of Wilbur's bed, it creaking and disturbing dust, and pulls the thing up beside him, unlatching the case to reveal a guitar as pristine as the last day he'd heard Wilbur play it. That was so long ago. Another lifetime. Tommy takes it out carefully, it's something precious and fragile. It sits awkwardly in his lap. He's not the one who is supposed to hold it.

"Ghostbur, come here," Tommy nods the ghost over. He sits beside him without complaint, looking at the guitar with mild interest.

"Oh, I remember this! We'd sing songs around the fire back in L'Manberg. Those were good nights, Tommy," Ghostbur nods knowingly.

"Yeah. They were," Tommy says, voice now soft and hoarse. "Here," he pushes it toward Ghostbur. "Go on, take it. It's... sort of yours, isn't it? By inheritance or proxy or some shit?"

Ghostbur blinks, looking contemplative, his grey, translucent hands taking the guitar hesitantly. It looks awkward in his fumbling and delicate fingers in a way it never was for Wil. Wil would've nestled it in front of his torso immediately, hand taking up the right position on its neck as naturally as breathing. Ghostbur holds it in front of him like he's been asked to just hold onto it for someone else. Which, Tommy supposes, he has.

Tommy stares at it, from Ghostbur's awfully familiar face to the guitar. "Go on, then. Couldn't you... the— You know, the song? One of the songs?" He asks a little desperately. "I've heard you sing it before, Ghostbur. The— The anthem!"

"Oh, I remember that Tommy!" Ghostbur nods, but his hands still rest uncertainly on the frame of the guitar. "I... I don't remember this bit, though."

"You— What?" Tommy's voice falters. "But... you remember the words, the song..."

"Oh of course I do, Tommy! Alivebur wrote it for *you*," Ghostbur says brightly.

Tommy feels a lump form in his throat, but he refuses to let himself cry. Not over something so little, and not in front of Wil. Not when the whole reason he's here with this stupid useless fucking shell is to maybe give Wil *something* to hold onto. Of course Ghostbur remembers the fucking song but not how to play the guitar. He'd written the song for Tommy, but playing the guitar had belonged to *him*. Nothing belonging to Wilbur had made him happy in the end.

"Let— Let me," Tommy snatches the guitar back almost protectively. He holds it how he'd seen Wilbur hold it a hundred times before. He puts his hands along the strings, his left hesitating as he tries to remember how Wilbur had placed himself along the fingerboard.

It's his left hand.

Fucking christ— is he stupid? It's his *left hand*. Even if Tommy had any fucking clue how to play, what the fuck is he planning on doing when he's down a finger? He can't hold the

guitar properly and his hands haven't stopped shaking in *so* long, he could barely tie his fucking shoes anymore and he thinks he can do *this*? That he can even *attempt* it?

He'd done this because he'd wanted to reach out to Wil, but the fucking problem remains Wil can't reach out to *him*. He can't show him how to properly hold the guitar, he can't tune it for him or show him the notes or tease him for messing it up. There's nothing. There's just a piece of shit out of tune guitar, his shaky, broken, *useless* hands, and the blank eyes of a ghost watching it all, linking his dead brother to the world about as helpfully as a noose would.

"Tommy?" Ghostbur says in a small voice. "Here, Tommy. Have some blue."

Tommy looks down at his hand through eyes blurred by tears. He could barely feel Ghostbur's hand brush against his, but now the blue stains his fingers.

"Y-You're gonna get it on the guitar, stop it," Tommy mutters, balling his right hand into a fist and trying to brush him away.

"Okay, Tommy. I'm sorry," Ghostbur still sounds so nervous.

"No you're not- Y-You're fuckin' not," Tommy's voice breaks. "You don't remember what you have to be sorry for, do you?"

"No, Tommy. I guess not... I don't think so."

"Because you're not him, are you? You're just not. A-And I dunno if he can even see this but-" Tommy takes a shaky breath, he almost wants to throw the guitar away from him, but he can't. So instead he puts it back in its case, kneeling before it and staring down at his shaking hands now covered in blue. "But I'm so sorry, Wil. If you can get this I am so fucking sorry, I know it's been so long for you, I know it's been years, but I promise I'm still trying it's just- *fuck*," Tommy bites down on his knuckles, trying to hold back another sob. "I can't I can't I can't-"

"Tommy-"

"Don't touch me!" He snarls at the cold hand gently touching his shoulder.

Ghostbur steps back, looking hurt. "I'll... I'll go, Tommy. I'm sorry I made you sad."

"Just get out! *Just get the fuck out of here!*" Tommy can't even shove him back, but the ghost drifts away anyway, leaving Tommy to his grief in the familiarity of a cold stone floor. Tommy falls back against the wall, burying his head in his hands, blue staining the white streak of his hair, as he breaks down into the echoing walls of the ravine.

~

<TommyInnit> im in L'Manberg. Going to look at Fundys hous b back later.

<Tubbo> Ok! Let me know if you need anything

Tubbo stares down at his comm for a moment. It still feels strange. To have Tommy communicating with him and going about his day independently, to know Tommy is alive out there and not trapped but finally living. Tommy keeps going out. Surely that's a sign of progress. Since burning Connor's house, Tommy has seemingly gotten much better. He's no longer a shut in, he eats well enough, even if sometimes Tubbo has to remind him. He no longer assumes every door will be locked against him and he's left that awful book of Dream's behind him. Tubbo has even noticed he doesn't get up in the night as often to check on Wilbur, still sometimes, but he's gotten better. And now, for the third day in a row, Tubbo comes home to an empty house and finds that Tommy has gone out into the world alone.

Tubbo doesn't know what to make of it, it worries him and makes him hopeful all at once. Tubbo trusts Tommy to be safe, even if it makes him anxious that Tommy is out there alone. He does his best not to worry.

Until evening arrives and Tommy is still not home.

**<Tubbo> Yu ok?**

**<Tubbo> Tomy?**

**<Tubbo> ?**

Tubbo paces the cabin, glancing out the windows occasionally, wondering if since it's dusk it's late enough that Tommy wouldn't be annoyed with him checking on him. Instead, there's a knock at the door. Tubbo knows it isn't Tommy. Tommy knows not to knock. Tubbo tries to bury his rising panic.

"Tommy?" Tubbo still says it when he opens the door, stepping back when a far more imposing figure stands in the doorway.

"Uh. No," Techno says awkwardly. "Is he... is he not here? I was here to see him, actually."

"Oh," Tubbo frowns. "Was he expecting you?"

"Uhhh no. Didn't think about that I just... Just got something to give him, that's all," Techno still lingers in the doorway, unsure if he's been invited in or not.

"Right, that's it," Tubbo huffs, going to the chest by the door and putting his armor back on.

"You... you okay there, Tubbo?" Techno watches him with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Tubbo glances back to him as he grabs his axe. "Maybe. Dunno. Depends on where the fuck Tommy is."

"...Right," Techno makes sure his own axe is in his hotbar. It always is. "Time for another rescue mission, huh?"

"No," Tubbo says sharply. "He— He probably just forgot to check his comm. Come on, he's in L'Manberg."

*He has to be.*

Tubbo and Techno proceed in awkward, if not urgent, silence. Tubbo's eyes remain set ahead, searching for the L'Manberg skyline. So much so he storms down the prime path and almost runs right past Tommy's house and into the tunnel.

He stops.

Tommy's home is crumbling.

Light pours from the widened doorway and onto the dark lawn, chunks of smooth stone continue to fall away to reveal the dirt layer underneath, and there Tommy stands in the middle of it all, swinging a pickaxe with the kind of slow determination of a long struggle.

"Tommy?"

Tommy screams. "FUCK— Tubbo! The fuck are you trying to do to me?!" Tommy clutches his chest, his already weary heart beating even harder. Tommy's arms and legs are burning by now. He's not ready for this kind of strenuous activity, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to stop.

"To *you*— Where have you *been*?!" Tubbo can't help but shout back, more bafflement than anger.

"I— I said I was gonna be in L'Manberg," Tommy gestures toward the city state. "I told you I was!"

"*Hours* ago, Tommy! You were gone so long and you weren't answering on your comm—you scared me!" Tubbo's shoulders lose some of their tension as he's swept by relief. He'd been burying how terrified he had been, focusing on his goals and only cool logic as he is wont to do when he gets this scared, but how could he not have thought the worst? "Oh my god, Tommy— I thought— I thought Dream had—" Tubbo takes a deep breath, exhaling a weighted sigh.

"My— My comm?" Tommy frowns. He searches his person for it, finally seeing Tubbo's messages. "Oh." He looks guilty. "Forgot about that." Tommy seems to just now notice, or at least acknowledge Technoblade, who has stood in his usual unsure fashion behind them both. "Fuck— You dragged Techno out here? Shit, I am so sorry, man, I didn't mean to... to be so much trouble," he finishes weakly. He's resting his weight on his pickaxe instead of his cane. He looks shakier than usual. Tubbo thinks he can see what looks like blue ink— Or rather *Ghostbur's* blue, still staining his hands. Actually, looking more closely, the blue is faintly visible in the white streak in Tommy's hair as well.

"Don't worry about it, Tommy. I, uh. I actually was lookin' for you," Techno rummages through his inventory for a moment.

"You were?" Tommy says reluctantly.

Techno retrieves whatever he had been looking for. “I replaced the glass and thought... thought you might want it back.” Techno extends a hand, a compass flat against his palm, shining fresh glass covering a needle which resolutely points to the figure beside him.

Tommy can see the words carefully engraved by ghostly hands. *Your Tubbo.*

“Oh,” Tommy stares at it. He doesn’t take it. “I thought... For a second I thought you were gonna ask to talk about when you saw me die.”

“Oh,” Techno has no idea what to say to that.

“I’m... I’m not *mad* at you, Techno. You know that, right?” Tommy raises an eyebrow at him.

“Good, ‘cause your anger is really high on my lists of priorities,” Techno says dryly, but he still holds the compass out to him.

“Cool,” Tommy scoffs, unimpacted by Techno’s apparent disinterest. “Basically, all I’ve got is what I’ve already said. Thanks for... for being there,” Tommy shrugs. “Not much more to it, eh?”

Techno nods, looking unsure. He doesn’t know how to tell Tommy he’s sorry, when they both know he isn’t really guilty. “Sooo do you not want the compass or..?”

Tommy accepts it, glancing from the needle over to his best friend. “I should break the enchantment,” he mutters.

“What? Why?” Tubbo frowns.

“If Dream gets me, it’ll take him right to you,” Tommy says.

“Dream didn’t seem to care about it when he crushed it,” Techno points out.

“It’s not safe, okay?” Tommy says irritably. He holds the compass tightly in his fist, heading to the enderchest in the back room, placing it carefully among his other precious belongings.

“What are you even doing out here, Tommy?” Tubbo stares around at the crumbling stone walls. Tubbo doesn’t know that there is an absence in this scene, something missing. He doesn’t know that there should be a guitar somewhere in here but there isn’t.

Tommy glances at the walls tiredly, sitting back on one of the chests with a weighted sigh, his hand going to his left leg, which had been protesting Tommy’s labors for a while now. His leg is still this strange mixture of numb but still sore. Irritating. He’d liked Fundy’s house well enough, but he hadn’t really seen the point in returning there rather than here. This one just needed some adjustments. “Fixing the house.”

“This is *fixing* the house?” Techno says dryly, unimpressed by the crumbling stone and the weaker dirt underneath.

“Yeah, *fixing the house*,” Tommy snaps. “Fuckin’ hated the stone bits. Made it echo too much like the—” Tommy stops himself. “I don’t like the stone. So. I’m making it dirt again.”

“Why are you doing that, Tommy?” Tubbo already looks worried. Tommy knows he won’t feel better hearing what he has to say.

“I’m moving back home,” Tommy nods. “About time, right?”

“You’re..?” Tubbo looks crestfallen. “Here? Alone?”

Tommy scowls. “Yeah *here, alone*.”

“But... why?”

Tommy sighs dramatically. “Really, Tubbo? We’ve talked about this, the *clingy* thing,” it’s clear Tommy is mostly joking, but Tubbo seems unamused.

“But we were... we were roomies!” Tubbo’s first excuse is weak, it’s emotional. Tommy looks unimpressed. So Tubbo gets logical. “What about— What about the stasis chambers, Tommy? We’d have to get everyone back to move them and Sam would have to rebuild them in your basement and we’d probably have to activate the ones at my place if people don’t want—”

“I was thinking I don’t *need* the stasis chambers anymore, eh?” Tommy cuts him off.

“You don’t?” Techno asks doubtfully.

“Well, yeah! It’s been a long time and Dream still hasn’t shown up, so,” Tommy shrugs, fiddling with his pickaxe.

“What the hell has gotten into you, Tommy?” Tubbo is getting more and more thrown off by the second.

“I would’ve thought you’d be *happy* for me, man!” Tommy exclaims. “This is progress, eh? I’m not all shut in the snow anymore, now am I?”

“What about Wilbur?” Tubbo asks sharply. “Are you going to bury him?”

Finally Tommy is effected in some way, looking as if he’s been slapped, mouth hanging open, staring at Tubbo like he’s betrayed him. Tubbo remembers what that look looks like. The silence extends. Techno definitely not planning on breaking it, and Tubbo watching Tommy’s expression for some reaction.

“No. No, I’m not,” Tommy says stiffly.

“What, are we gonna move his corpse again, then? Drag it over here instead?” Tubbo says it like a challenge. He wants Tommy to say something, to fight him on this, to give some indication that this shouldn’t scare Tubbo.

Tommy says nothing.

There's too much bitterness in Tubbo's eyes. "You'll have to settle on a spot eventually, Tommy. You can't expect us to keep moving a dead body around like a fucking— a fucking decoration! Hm? So, really, you're *actually* moving back in here alone, it'll just be you and Wilbur's body like old times?"

Tommy doesn't get angry. Somehow that's worse. He just looks tense, like if he opens his mouth he's going to be sick.

"Well?" Tubbo doesn't stop. He's desperate and worried and almost growing cruel because of it. He doesn't know why Tommy is doing this, how can he not get defensive?

"Actually," Tommy's voice is quieter now, but steady. "I was gonna leave him in Snowchester. I thought... I thought I could just trust you to check on him for me."

Tubbo's eyes widen, every bit of defiance sapped away from just a few words. The silence presses in. The blackness outside contrasting the light within until it feels like this room is the only thing in the world. Still, they don't speak.

"Well, looks like you two have a lot to talk about, so," Techno finally breaks the silence, coughing deliberately. "I'm... gonna go. Uh. Bye." And with that, Techno all but fled the tension in the crumbling house in the hill.

Tommy stares down at his pick, swinging it over the wooden floors. He doesn't want to be mad at Tubbo anymore, but for some reason he feels like the only other option is this strange feeling of dread. He *knows* why. Of course he does. But he's so tired of Dream still infecting the few relationships he has left.

"I shouldn't— I shouldn't have said that," Tubbo finally says the right thing.

"Yeah," Tommy scoffs gloomily. "You shouldn't have."

"I'm just— I'm just worried about you, man. I don't know how you feel comfortable moving back here, and I guess I— I wanted you in Snowchester because I want to know you're safe," Tubbo tries to explain, not to justify his harsh words, but to let Tommy know it wasn't supposed to be malice. He's just scared.

"We can't know that, Tubbo," Tommy says. He sounds too calm. He's still not looking Tubbo in the eye. "I'm tired of waiting around and nothing happening. I've got to do something."

Tubbo nods. "Okay. Okay, Tommy. I... I'm glad you are. I dunno how I was such a dick about this, when I should be proud of you— I *am* proud of you," he says firmly. "I want you to be able to be at home and to... not be so scared, right?"

Tommy manages a weak smile that neither of them quite believe, but it's an attempt. "Right."

Tubbo still hesitates. "And... are you sure you're okay spending the night here? I could... I could stay. I could help you! To get rid of the stone. I don't mind, really."

Tommy stands wearily, wincing as his sore muscles protest. He sets aside his pickaxe. “Nah, Tubbo. I think it’ll be good for me. Being alone for a night.”

“Are you... are you *totally sure*?” Tubbo has to check. He wants to be happy for his best friend. He really does. He knows this mother-hen act isn’t good for either of them, but he’s just so scared of losing his best friend again.

“I’m sure, Tubbo,” Tommy says. He’s strangely gentle now. He sighs, pulling Tubbo into a hug, holding onto him tightly. Tubbo squeezing back easily, burying his face in Tommy’s shoulder. He’s not as skinny as he had been at the start. That offers Tubbo a little more comfort, knowing Tommy is better in ways he can measure. “I love you, man. And— And all this is temporary, alright? All this... strangeness and bad stuff. Dream will turn up and I’m gonna get Wil back, and then it’ll all get easier. Promise.”

Tubbo doesn’t believe him. “Okay, Tommy.” Tubbo turns back towards outside, he doesn’t want to go, but he will, if that’s really what Tommy wants.

“Wait,” Tommy stops him, a gentle hold on his friend’s sleeve. He hesitates. “It’s not... it’s not *that* late. Do you... do you want to help me tear down the stone for a bit? Not too late, but... I don’t *hate* your company, you know.”

Tubbo smiles. “Oh really? Who’s clingy now?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Tommy shoves him lightly. “Quit standing around, I’m not paying you to gawk at me!”

“Oh, you’re paying me, are you?”

“Yeah, with the honor of being in my company.”

Maybe Tubbo starts to believe Tommy is getting better. He’s working and joking and he doesn’t keep looking over his shoulder anymore. That barking laugh resurfaces more easily and Tommy has a light behind his eyes. He feels like he’s really *here*, existing in this moment instead of haunting some terrible past. Tubbo can look at this version of Tommy and see his best friend. For once he can look at Tommy and he cannot find that pang of grief still resonating inside of his chest. So it goes.

Tommy finally tosses aside his pick, leaning heavily against the wall. “Finally,” he sighs. “Much better, right?”

“Er, yeah,” Tubbo stares around at the dirt walls, now repacked and stable enough, and still isn’t sure if he sees the improvement. But it makes Tommy happy, so he’ll lean into it. “What about your bedroom? That’s got stone.”

Tommy seems to consider this for a moment. “Yeah, but I’m just sleeping in there. I spend most of my time in here, getting shit done,” Tommy nods knowingly.

“Fair enough. Do you want... don’t you want doors?” Tubbo looks doubtfully at the still open doorframe.



“Er, definitely not,” Tommy scoffs. “This part of the server is lit up like a fuckin’ christmas tree I’m not that worried about mobs and shit. I like... I like air,” is how Tommy decides to phrase his current feelings after so much time in a cell.

“Me too,” Tubbo teases.

“Real funny, Tubso,” Tommy teases right back. He sighs. “Right, you should go home. Actually get some sleep. And I should too.”

Tubbo is getting tired, but he still hesitates. “And... and you’re *sure*?”

“Fucking hell— yes, Tubbo, I’m sure,” Tommy rolls his eyes at his best friend, teasing him. He grins. “So *clingy*.”

Tubbo laughs. “Fine. Okay— I’ll leave. I’m going,” Tubbo takes one hesitant step towards the door. “See you tomorrow, bossman.”

Tommy’s smile falters for a moment, he puts a hand on Tubbo’s shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Love you, Tubbo. You’re a good friend.”

“Don’t get too sappy on me, Tommy,” Tubbo pauses only for another moment before he forces himself to turn around and head down the prime path. He cannot stop himself from glancing back before turning the corner, and Tommy stays there, watching him walk away without fear, just an easy nod and a smirk. Tubbo needs to learn how to let him be. Tommy seemed sure, so Tubbo will be sure too. His best friend is getting better, he doesn’t seem so scared anymore. That’s something to be celebrated. That should matter far more than whatever hangups Tubbo seems to be having. He’ll be fine alone for one night. Maybe Tubbo will move back into his old house tomorrow, so he’ll be closer to him. One night apart. Tubbo can bear one night apart.

Tommy feels guilty. He dully thinks that it’s *good* that he feels guilty, really. It means he’s feeling something. The last time, he’d felt guilty too, but that had been because when he thought of Tubbo he still had no regrets. He pauses again, choosing to wait, but it still isn’t a matter of second thoughts.

He’ll sleep through the rest of the night. He wants to see the sunrise.

He doesn’t end up sleeping. He lays awake in his old home and it feels wrong, it feels *unfamiliar*. The blankets are stiff from their lack of use and Tubbo was right. He doesn’t like staring up at the stone ceiling. It’s not obsidian, but he misses the wooden beams of Tubbo’s cabin. Those have depth, it’s not just a boxed off room. Tommy rolls on his side, looking out of the doorway into his front room. From here he can just barely make out a sliver of the outside. Part of him is just hoping someone will come get him, to snap him out of this one way or another.

No one comes.

That’s alright, then. Tommy knows what he’s doing.

Tommy stares at that thin line into the outside world and refuses to think about the crack in the obsidian he'd spent hours clawing at. His thumb runs over the grooves of scars around his fingernails. He forces himself to stop, before he starts scratching. He watches until the blackness of night softens into blue. Tommy's hands are still stained from Ghostbur's efforts at kindness the day before. He should get going.

Tommy sits up, stretching until his back cracks. He's still sore from yesterday, but it's a good kind of sore. One from the aftermath of a project instead of a beating. Tommy fumbles for his shoes, lacing them up with only a few moments of struggle. Progress. He rummages in his inventory, finding his journal. Tommy flips to the first blank page and scribbles something down quickly before returning it to his person, doing his best not to agonize over the words. That's one part done. Tommy meanders over to his open doorway. The sun has yet to crest over the distant hills, so the world remains soft and blue, the grass damp with dew and Tommy would imagine if he laid down on the prime path it would be cold and damp as well. The sun would rise and the world would dry out again. Tommy considers breakfast. He can eat carrots now. That's nice. Tommy takes some from his garden and proceeds through the tunnel toward L'Manberg. This feels like a gentle morning, Tommy thinks. Maybe on another day he would force the world awake with him, an explosion of noise and energy and excitement to warm the ground first. This is easier for him now. The carrots are still sweet, but the sugar doesn't hurt his teeth anymore. Tommy makes it to the stairs when he realizes, irritably, that he'd left his cane back in his house.

He descends the steps with a bit more delicacy. Not that it mattered much. Tommy wouldn't have been able to use a cane to go up the ladders in the tower. Tommy walks around L'Manberg, glancing at Phil and Ranboo's darkened windows side by side. He buries another pang of guilt. The other side he can see the docks. He knows if he goes down the hill he'd find Niki's bakery, abandoned from what he's heard. Tommy keeps walking until he reaches Eret's tower. This part is going to be a bit shit, but the walk over had been nice. That counts for something, he thinks.

Tommy stares up the ladder ruefully. He remembers climbing it before, in a rush of energy with friends and fellow soldiers at his back. The 16th. When they'd first realized they were winning.

This climb is slower, more exhausting even without the weight of armor. Tommy reaches the first level just as the sunrise finally breaks over the horizon. The blue is gone. Instead, a flood of yellow and orange. The sun rises behind the tower. So Tommy isn't blinded as he looks over New L'Manberg. He has to admit, Tubbo and Ghostbur did a good job. It's beautiful in a way the original L'Manberg had never quite been. Less clumsy.

Tommy looks down and cannot hide the thought from himself: *how can you just give all this up when you just got it back?*

And the answer is far easier than the question.

*Because you know you deserve to see it with Wil. Together.*

Tommy feels an ache in his chest, but still, he clambers up between the crenels of the tower.

“Oy! Tommy! The fuck are you doing, mate? You’re gonna fall!”

“Fuck,” Tommy mutters. He was supposed to do it before anyone woke up.

“Tommy?” Phil shouts up again when Tommy doesn’t reply.

“Of-fucking-course you’re up, aren’t you, Phil? Early bird gets the worm and all that shit?” Tommy shouts back.

“What’d you mean?” Phil laughs a little nervously now. “Just– Just back up off the ledge, will you? You look like one good bit of wind would knock you over and I can’t fly up there to catch you anymore, you know?”

Tommy doesn’t move, he refuses to look Phil in the eye. He isn’t sure what to do now. He’d planned it so carefully. He’d left a note so Tubbo would know his logic, he’d considered lava– an easy route– but had decided he didn’t want his friends searching for his bones, and if his body was accessible, maybe it would be more likely to tempt Dream to get to him. So he’d settled on jumping. Jumping wouldn’t have been bad if Philza fucking Minecraft hadn’t showed up right when he shouldn’t have.

“Fuck,” Phil says as Tommy’s prolonged silence speaks for itself. “Tommy– What– For gods sake– what were you planning on doing?!” Phil shouts even as Tommy’s intentions are abundantly clear.

“...thought it’d be obvious,” Tommy calls back, hands fidgeting restlessly at his sides.

“Obvious– Jesus Christ, Tommy, you can’t be– Just– Just step back, alright, mate? We’ll– We can talk about this!” Phil is beginning to feel frantic now. Because this is familiar. The last time Phil had been so much calmer because he’d been so sure that Wilbur would listen to him. That his son hadn’t changed that much. So sure right up until he pressed that button.

Phil doesn’t have any more wings to sacrifice.

“Tommy, just look at me! What’re you– What is this gonna do, Tommy? You fought so hard to get back home, why throw that away?” Phil keeps his eyes locked on Tommy. Even if Tommy takes a step forward, it’s not like Phil can do anything. He doesn’t have a water bucket or anything to break a fall.

“Why– *You* of all people saying that shit to me, Phil...” Tommy scoffs. The logic had been absolute in Tommy’s mind. *You cannot get Wilbur back without Dream. Dream still has complete control over you. The only way you can regain that control is to draw him out. You draw him out by killing yourself. Dream revives you, he’s there, you make him revive Wilbur too.*

“Me of all people–” Phil laughs nervously. He scrambles for any thought to get Tommy to take a step back instead of forward. “What would Eret think of you using their tower?”

Tommy actually seems to consider this for a moment. “...They don’t have to know if you don’t tell them.”

“Well– Well I *will* tell them, actually! So, so you just get down, yeah?” Phil fumbles for his comm. He needs to get Tubbo down here.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Phil. Don’t get a crowd down here, or I’ll be sure to jump before they get here,” Tommy notices immediately.

“Well, maybe– Maybe some people will want to say goodbye!” Phil tries weakly.

Tommy looks down at him scathingly. “*Really*, Phil? Is this the best you’ve got? Dunno what I expect from the guy who helped Wil with his thing...”

“It wasn’t– It wasn’t like that!” Phil just has to keep talking. Just keep Tommy talking until he can get help or something. He’s still itching to message Tubbo. “I thought– The way Wil said it, I thought he was gonna– gonna die to some fucked up execution by you all or– or try to hurt more people a-and he– he wasn’t supposed to be on his last life!”

“...Maybe I’m not on my last life, Phil. You don’t know how revival works.”

“You’re a shit liar, Tommy!”

“Look, Phil, don’t take this so personally, man! I’m not Wilbur. And this isn’t even supposed to be permanent! Just think about it– This gets Dream to come crawling out of whatever hole he’s hiding out in, and then we get Wil back! I know you want that too,” Tommy didn’t want an audience. He doesn’t know what to do besides convince Phil to turn away.

“You– You can’t *know* that!”

“What other fucking option is there?!” Tommy shouts. “I’m not gonna keep waiting around so Wil has to spend the rest of eternity waiting for me to do my fucking job and be a good brother!”

Phil sighs. Looking up at that distant figure. He understands Tommy’s anger, he does, but Phil doesn’t know how to tell Tommy there’s another way when he himself feels just as helpless. So he turns to something maybe a little cruel. “...What would Wilbur think of what you’re doing? He helped you escape. What would he think of you throwing it all away?”

That was the wrong thing to say.

Tommy is screaming at him now. “*He did this to me first!* You– You want to talk about throwing it all away– Look around you, Phil! Your house is on top of a fucking crater!” Tommy laughs, hysterical and furious.

Phil doesn’t stop trying. “And from what you’ve said he regretted it.”

Tommy’s lip trembles. All Phil can see is a frozen figure still on a precipice. Tommy’s next words are quieter. He doesn’t know if Phil can hear him, he doesn’t care. “Not enough.”

He steps forward. There are hands around his waist.

*“Stop!” Tommy screams more on instinct than anything. “Let go! Let me go!” Underneath the panic maybe there’s a bit of satisfaction. You did it. You drew him out and now Dream is going to take you away again.*

It’s not Dream.

Not that that realization means anything at this point, because Tommy and Ranboo are both tumbling over the edge.

It’s over in an instant, too fast for Tommy to really process what’s happening, all he knows is blinding pain in his ankle as he lands on his leg– and then there’s water and the pain stops there. Tommy is drenched and Ranboo is too.

Phil runs to them the moment they began to fall, falling to his knees beside them. “It’s okay, it’s okay, you’re both okay,” he tears off his cloak and frantically tries to dry the water from Ranboo’s skin.

Ranboo doesn’t let go, even as Tommy fights to get away, even as his skin burns, he cannot let go of Tommy, he keeps his arms around him, trembling, pain secondary to knowing Tommy is still breathing.

## Chapter End Notes

:)

The dark before the dawn. pinky promise.

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

CW: descriptions of injuries, lots of suicide talk, referencing the last chapter, ya know.

Also please forgive my lack of editing, I also posted... another work at the same time as this one so, it might not be as polished as usual (as if it's ever polished lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Ph1LzA whispers to you: Tommy did something. Maybe better if you hear it from me in person***

***You whisper to Ph1LzA: is he okay***

There's a mere moment of pause, but it's enough to turn worry into panic.

***Ph1LzA whispers to you: He tried to hurt himself. He's not hurt badly. You better come soon as you can. We're in L'Manberg.***

Tubbo had been awake maybe two minutes. His comm had been online for a matter of seconds, and Phil shakes off whatever sleepiness had remained and replaces it with cold dread. Tubbo's first coherent thought is simple in its cruelty. *You never should have left him alone.*

Tubbo shows up on the scene maybe a minute after Ponk and Sam do. Ponk to deal with burn scars and a broken ankle, Sam because Ponk is there. Tubbo just wants to know what the fuck happened. Phil stands and half blocks his way, looking almost guilty.

"Tubbo—"

"What the fuck did you do?!" Tubbo's eyes remain locked on Tommy.

"*Tubbo*," now Phil is definitely blocking his way, a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Get off— What the fuck were you thinking?!" Tubbo is still trying to storm ahead toward Tommy.

Tommy doesn't say anything, just stares at Tubbo. He doesn't look guilty, just miserable. He winces as Ponk wraps his ankle.

"How could you—" Tubbo's voice breaks, furious tears fighting to get free, as he still pushes against Phil's hand on his shoulder. "You— You *know* what this does, Tommy!" Every word

radiates fury and hurt. How *dare* Tommy just sit there and not even shout back— “You *know* the kind of damage this does—”

“Stop— Just take a minute and stop,” Phil doesn’t let go.

“You know why...” Tommy finally speaks, muttering under his breath. It’s like he’s not even here, like he’s not really speaking to his best friend, treating Tubbo like in this equation he is *nothing*.

Tubbo is breathing hard now. Phil wants him to walk away. He *should* walk away.

“You were learning to live without Wilbur before you got exiled again. Why can’t you try to live again now?”

Tommy stares at him in stunned horror, but he doesn’t say a word. Tubbo waits for him to react, to do *anything*. The silence stretches the tension like a rubber band.

“Sam, could you get Ranboo a splash health pot?” Ponk speaks up like Tubbo hadn’t just shouted at their patient.

“Sure,” Sam is far worse at hiding his discomfort.

“Ranboo? Why’s Ranboo hurt?” Tubbo remains sharp, but for a moment he’s distracted.

“I’m fine, Tubbo,” Ranboo says wearily, wincing as Sam pours the health potion onto the splash of burns across his skin.

“He— He shouldn’t have—” Tommy finally speaks, snapping and sharp. He’s put the sheer malice of Tubbo’s words behind a wall. He’ll keep them buried to break down about later, right now Tubbo doesn’t even deserve his presence let alone a reply. “You fuckin’ used a water bucket *without armor* are you fucking stupid?!”

Ranboo stares at him, baffled. “I didn’t exactly have time to put on armor when you were already up on the ledge!”

“Tommy, you...” Tubbo’s voice softens, more hurt than angry now. He’d known. Surely he’d known, but to hear it from Ranboo— *you were already up on the ledge*.

Yet again Tommy had tried to kill himself and Tubbo hadn’t been there. Tommy refuses to look at him.

“I’ll fill you in,” Phil keeps a gentle hand on Tubbo’s shoulder. “Let’s let them get cleaned up, alright?”

Tubbo is still staring at Tommy, like he wants to say more, but he lets Phil lead him back down the hill toward New L’Manberg, stopping outside the ring of the crater. They can see fish swimming between the posts of the platforms.

“Why’d you pull me aside, Phil?” Tubbo stares down at the water.

“Because you’re clearly– and understandably– angry, but Tommy does not need anger right now,” Phil says firmly.

“How do *you* know what he needs...” Tubbo mutters bitterly. “Apparently, no one does, because he–” Tubbo’s voice breaks. He coughs. He will not cry right now. “I thought he was *better*.”

Phil knows this is not about him. For that reason he would never voice this thought aloud, but it still lingers. So many letters from Wilbur. About winning an election, about leaving by choice, starting anew, being *better*.

That inkling in the back of his head that something was wrong when Wil went radio silent. Rushing to the server, following his son, and that *room*–

Right. *Better*.

“Sometimes you can’t know what’s really going on. Would you have treated him any differently if you’d thought he wasn’t better?” Phil asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you were already being kind to him. And trying to look after him. So, if you had known, what would’ve been any different?” Phil is both logical and kind.

Tubbo has no patience for it. “I would’ve kept an eye on him. I would’ve stayed the night. I would’ve fucking been there before he’d gotten up there,” Tubbo wishes he were merely cold. That his anger wasn’t a mask for frustrated fear and guilt. He feels like he’s failed. He’s angry, alright. Maybe at Tommy, but at himself as well. How could he not *see* it?

~

Tommy doesn’t feel guilty. He’s frustrated. And he knows he can’t blame Ranboo or Phil for saving him, but he still wishes they hadn’t. He cannot think about what Tubbo had just done. *Learning to live without him*. Is that what Tommy had been doing, in that brief lull between the bombs and exile? *Don’t think about it. Don’t fucking think about it*. Still, he’s happy to chew Ranboo out for other reasons.

“Why the fuck did you grab me?! You grabbed me from behind did you think I wouldn’t flip the fuck out?! I thought you were– I thought you were *Dream* for fucks sake!” Tommy snaps.

“I couldn’t just let you fall!” Ranboo keeps on defending himself. He looks hurt. In more ways than one.

“Both of you shut up for a second!” Ponk interjects. “Ranboo, I need you to go change clothes. Right now, can you do that for me? The burns are only going to get worse until you get all of the water off of you,” Ponk has no time for their shit. “Come on, get up,” Ponk grabs his hand, struggling to pull a kid almost twice their height up.

“Okay, okay,” Ranboo mutters, wincing as his damp suit continues to sting and worsen his wounds.



“Sam, go with him and use another health pot once his skin is dry.”

Sam hesitates, clearly not wanting to leave Ponk’s side but he yields from just a look, following Ranboo down the hill towards L’Manberg.

Ponk and Phil had seemingly had the same idea. Get these boys separated until they can all cool down.

“So, Tommy,” Ponk begins.

Tommy is tense, waiting for Ponk’s questions. The ever cruel task of explaining what had happened, of telling them *why*.

“How’s the physical therapy going?” Is what Ponk asks instead.

Now Tommy feels a pang of guilt alongside relief. Ponk didn’t want to know about his suicide attempt. That’s good. The problem is, “haven’t really... I haven’t really *done* the physical therapy stuff,” he mutters.

“Oh, your leg stopped hurting then, did it?”

“...no.”

Ponk scoffs, “then why aren’t you doing it then, stupid?”

“I’m not stupid!” Tommy says indignantly.

“Uh huh. This ankle of yours. It’s your right one. You know that, right?” Ponk says pointedly.

“And?”

“Your recovery was probably gonna be easier if your left leg didn’t hurt too!” Ponk bumps shoulders with him lightly.

Tommy doesn’t know what to say. Ponk isn’t scolding him for jumping off a building and breaking his ankle, they’re just scolding him for not taking care of himself beforehand. Somehow it means Tommy doesn’t feel like he can get defensive. So Tommy doesn’t say anything, just folds his arms over his chest, still damp and shivering.

“And hey! Where’s your cane?” Ponk asks.

“...Back at the house,” Tommy mutters. “I’ve been using it! I have,” he defends himself. “Was just... a bit distracted this morning...”

“Alright, alright, whatever you say, Tommy,” Ponk placates him. They seem genuine. A pause. “I don’t really... know much about this stuff. I know how bodies work. I know the steps you’re supposed to take to make them better. And, I mean...” Ponk doesn’t look at him, instead staring out over L’Manberg. “Can’t be all that different, can it? You don’t get better by waiting for it to cure itself. You get help, hm? And if some stuff can’t be healed...”

Ponk's eyes wander down to their feet, to the metal that has replaced their body from the knees down. "You make do. And let people help you."

Tommy watches them, but he doesn't say anything. He knows he's supposed to say something. To validate Ponk saying something kind or at the very least to be rude and standoffish so they don't feel obligated to be gentle with him anymore. Still, Tommy says nothing. Ponk doesn't rebuke him for this or expect anything of him at all. That alone is almost too much for Tommy to bear right now.

"You're still all cold and wet! One second. I will be right back, okay?" Ponk takes a few steps down the hill, turning back and stopping until Tommy nods.

Tommy is surprised. He hadn't thought anyone would leave him alone after all that. What's stopping him from just climbing back up and jumping before someone can stop him?

...A broken ankle. Right. Fuck.

~

Sam walks beside Ranboo anxiously as they return to his house, Ranboo shedding his wet clothes, mumbling "ow, ow, ow, ow—" all the while.

Sam turns around. "S-So, Tommy... he..."

"What?" Ranboo glances over his shoulder, dabbing carefully at his burns which manifested harshly in his soaked socks, reaching his knees, soaking his hands where he'd held onto Tommy.

"Do you... do you want help?" Sam offers, scuffing his feet on the floor. "Ponk is... way better at this stuff, but I could... I've got the health pot..."

Ranboo sighs. He doesn't know Sam the way he knows Tubbo and Tommy, but Sam has proven more than enough that he wants to help, to protect. Ranboo can't help but place some trust in that. "Yeah. Yeah, actually, this... it's hard to do when it hurts," Ranboo offers Sam the towel. "I'm, uh. I'm actually pretty lucky, all things considered," Ranboo laughs dryly. "I stuck the landing. Better than Tommy did. I mean, I could've ended up in the water face down... now *that* would've sucked..."

Ranboo inhales sharply as Sam gently dabs at the burns.

"Sorry. I think Ponk might have to bandage these ones, I don't know if a health pot will be able to take care of it all the way," Sam says, his focus on being delicate. He doesn't comment on the strange nature of Ranboo's wounds emerging in two colors. "You know, you're a pretty brave kid, Ranboo."

"Am I?" Ranboo scoffs.

"Yes," Sam says firmly. "You saved your friend, at... great personal cost. We've seen you, you know. Staying with him. Both of them. First you were there for Tubbo, and now you're there for the both of them. You're a good person."

A pause, Sam carefully applying the splash potion to the worst parts of the burns, the pain dulling to an ache. Ranboo's eyes water. He holds back. He's been burned enough today. "Thank you."

Sam just stands and smiles, and hands him a health pot. "Let's get back to them, then. If you're up for it?"

Ranboo takes a deep, shaky breath. No more tears. "Yeah. Yeah, let's get back."

~

Ponk returns with a towel and a blanket. Tommy accepts them gratefully.

"I should probably have Sam run and get you crutches, too."

"Does Sam just do whatever you say?"

Ponk leans back against the tower wall smugly. "Yeah, pretty much. Speak of the handsome devil!" Ponk says as Sam and Ranboo climb the hill.

Sam blushes, trying to hold back a smile. It feels like too somber a situation for Sam to fall to Ponk's charm. He tries to shake it off.

"Ranboo," Tommy starts, looking up at his friend and scrambling for the right words.

"Sorry. For. Yeah."

"It's okay, Tommy," Ranboo sits on the stoop beside him. "I'm not sorry. At all."

Tommy manages a smile at this, "dickhead," he mumbles fondly.

"Oh, yeah— Ponk, could you take a look at the burns? I don't know if they need wrapped or not," Sam nods to Ranboo.

"Can do!" Ponk kneels down beside Ranboo. "Can you roll up your trousers for me? Do you *only* wear suits, Ranboo?" They tease him lightly.

Ranboo obliges, rolling his eyes. "Maybe. I like wearing suits, okay?"

Tommy glances over. Ranboo's monochrome skin is an angry red on one leg and a sickly green on the other. Tommy buries himself deeper in the blanket, a knot in his stomach as all he can think is he put those burns there.

"I think you're okay, Ranboo. If it starts hurting bad, maybe use another splash pot, alright?" Ponk stands, accepting Sam's hand helping them to their feet. "Sammy, would you *please* go to Lemon City and get my old crutches for me? Please?" Ponk looks up at Sam, endearing to the last.

Sam squints down at them, turning to look down the hill where Phil and Tubbo are still in sight. "Yeah, okay. Can you not wander off alone while I'm gone?"

“I promise,” Ponk rolls their eyes.

Tommy watches this exchange gloomily. He’s beginning to notice something. Ponk doesn’t know. Sam hasn’t told them. Tommy has yet to see Ponk without Sam somewhere close behind and Tommy knows why. He’s read it. Ponk is on the menu. Dream is not happy with his Warden and Sam knows this, enough so that Sam knows what Dream will take away from him. No wonder Sam is terrified to let Ponk out of his sight. He betrayed Dream more intimately than the rest of them had, and Sam had seen the exact fallout of Dream’s anger written in Tommy’s many scars, he’d heard the stories and heard Ponk’s name snuck into them alongside his own. The *Warden*. He’d failed to be the Warden and that’s a good thing, but Dream’s musing threats linger either way. Ponk can’t know, surely. Tommy can’t imagine Ponk could be so calm knowing the man they love is living as a watchdog instead of a partner.

Maybe Tommy is just assuming. Maybe Ponk does know. They must know something. They’ve been humoring Sam’s anxieties all this time, but it must be hard. Tommy thinks of the way Tubbo gets so scared for him that he gets angry instead— Well, Tommy isn’t the only one who needs Dream dead in a gutter.

That’s the truth of the matter, isn’t it? Tubbo had shouted at him because he’s terrified. Tommy had caused that. How can he blame his best friend for that anger when he understands it?

“You...” Ranboo speaks up before stopping himself. “I was... I was gonna ask if you’re okay, but...”

“Oh, you’re not gonna like the answer, so why ask, eh?” Tommy laughs harshly.

“Well, I was gonna say maybe you don’t want to talk,” Ranboo says instead.

Tommy pauses. “I know I’m all pissed off, and I can’t just turn that off, I am fucking pissed at you for grabbing me,” Tommy wanted to make things better, but he knows he sounds angry. Tommy takes a deep breath. This isn’t the point of all this. “But... I know you were in the right, in some bullshit way... And I... I probably would’ve done the same. So. Thanks.”

Ranboo manages a smile. “Yeah. Don’t mention it. Any time, okay? Any time.”

“Really?” Tommy gives him a look.

“Preferably not often, though,” Ranboo says quickly, laughing nervously. “Maybe give me more of a heads up so I can get on armor.”

Tommy is struggling to feel grateful to Ranboo for grabbing him, but he can at least feel grateful to him for joking with him instead of treating him like a bomb in the aftermath. Tommy cannot make any resolutions to live right now, but he can resolve that Ranboo won’t have to save him again. He should’ve planned it better. He probably won’t have the opportunity to try again for a long time, but eventually. He won’t let Ranboo get burned for him again.

Tubbo and Phil make their own return, Phil giving Tubbo a weighted look, glancing between him and Tommy.

Tubbo stops.

This is the part where he apologizes for shouting, for the awful, thoughtless things he had said. The part where he explains how much Tommy scared him, but that he got scared because he loves him and doesn't want him hurt or gone. Where he explains that he understands Tommy is hurting, that he needs help, that he doesn't blame him for being for all intents and purposes sick and in need of healing. Tubbo stares at Tommy, at a face that has regrown its familiarity, scars and all, at blue-grey eyes, bones no longer jutting out so sharply, and he can't.

Tubbo turns around and leaves him, setting off across L'Manberg, in the direction of Snowchester.

They all watch him go and no one says a thing. Not until he disappears over the horizon.

"Well, go on," Tommy mutters.

"What?" Phil asks.

"Not you," Tommy stares up at Ranboo. "Go on, then. Go to him."

Ranboo's eyebrows furrow together as he seems to consider Tommy carefully. "I don't choose him, you know," he says each word slowly, with intent deliberation. "I mean— I mean of *course* I choose him, but it's— It's not one or the other. You're my friend too."

Tommy doesn't waver. He won't pretend he isn't touched, that Ranboo's words don't bring him some comfort, but Ranboo has misunderstood what he's asking. "I know, Ranboo. I'm not asking 'cause I think you want to leave me. I'm asking because I want you to take care of him. After I— Because—" Tommy stops, taking a deep breath, staring at the grass at his feet. It's still damp. He remembers when the solace he took in just being outside had felt like enough to keep him alive forever. "I think... I think it's best if I don't go back to Snowchester for a bit."

"Tommy, you can't be alone—"

"He won't be," Phil speaks up. "You can stay at mine, Tommy. If you want to."

Tommy almost laughs. It's a cruel contradiction. *You can't be alone*. Can't, not shouldn't. This isn't a choice for him anymore. And perfect Philza offers *if you want to* like Tommy in any way has a say.

"Yeah. Thanks, Phil," is all Tommy says. "Ranboo? Can you do this for me?"

Ranboo hesitates for another moment, glancing from Tommy to where Tubbo had disappeared. He nods. "Okay, Tommy. I'll— I'll come by later. To check on you if that's okay."

“Yeah, yeah fine whatever, man. Go on,” Tommy waves him off.

Now Ranboo leaves.

Tommy doesn't regret sending him to Tubbo, but some part of him wishes he had stayed instead. He wishes more that Tubbo had stayed, even if he understands why he didn't.

Sam returns quickly with crutches. Tommy can imagine he'd been anxious to get back. “Here, Tommy,” Sam offers him a hand up, keeping him steady while Tommy gets his balance on the crutches. Great. He's got a leg he can barely feel except when it's stiff and sore and now a fucked up ankle.

*Whose fault is that, then?*

“That should work, Tommy! Do they feel okay?” Ponk asks. “You shouldn't go too heavy on the health pots, but if you take another one in, like, maybe twelve hours? That might be good enough that you can put weight on it again.”

“Really?” Tommy says doubtfully.

“Yep! And guess what? You can do some of your physical therapy without using your other leg! So, maybe you'll just end up using the cane for your right side instead, eh?” Ponk teases him.

“Fuckin' *fine*, Ponk, I'll do it,” Tommy grumbles.

“I'd do it with you,” Phil speaks up.

“Why the fuck would you do physical therapy for an injury you don't have?” Tommy scoffs.

“No—” Phil laughs. “Not that exactly, but I do stretches so my wings don't atrophy. Can't fly, but if I just leave 'em there, they start to hurt after a while.”

“Oh,” Tommy frowns. He hadn't realized how many people surrounding his life were all working with long term injuries. Tommy now knows what it's like to have scar tissue that still hurts long after it's healed. He wonders if Tubbo's scars still hurt him. He should ask him. If Tubbo ever wants to talk to him again, that is.

“Come on, Tommy. Techno was gonna come by for dinner. If that's alright,” Phil nods back down the hill towards his house in L'Manberg.

Tommy feels frozen. “A-Are we really not gonna talk about this?”

“What?” Ponk asks.

Tommy stares at all of them. People who do care about him, sure, but they're not his family. His family is either entombed back in Snowchester or probably talking about him in that cabin. And still, none of them have pushed.

“I- I just tried to fucking kill myself. None of you have- Have *pushed*-”

“Did you want us to ask about it, Tommy?” Sam asks softly.

“N-No—”

“It’s not that we don’t care, mate, we just didn’t want you to think—”

“Yeah, I get it you’re all so fucking careful with me, but— I just—” Tommy doesn’t know what he wants from them. “I don’t...” Tommy trails off. He doesn’t know what to do. His plan had failed. He’s just as trapped as he had been before, and no one is fucking saying anything about it.

The silence extends and Tommy sort of wants to melt into the floor.

“Well!” Ponk sighs. “I think Sam and I are gonna head out, but you keep an eye on that ankle, Tommy. Don’t put any weight on it, you got that?” Ponk is a doctor first and foremost.

Tommy nods.

“I’ll... see you later, Tommy. Or whenever,” Sam says uncertainly. He pauses for another moment. “We’re still looking, you know. Every day. Not just for him, but for a revive book or any information— We’re... we’re still looking,” Sam says it like he knows it isn’t enough.

“Thank you, Sam,” Tommy tells him what he wants to hear. He means it, in a way, but he also thinks every word Sam had just said is worthless to him.

Then it’s just him and Phil.

“If you want to talk about it, you can,” Phil says.

Tommy just shakes his head, beginning the slow, laborious task of getting down to the platforms of L’Manberg on crutches.

It’s only once Tommy has settled in at Phil’s kitchen table, a mug in front of him and Phil shuffling around the kitchen, that Tommy speaks again.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What’s that, mate?”

“I don’t want to talk about what I did,” Tommy repeats firmly.

Phil hesitates, unsure of what Tommy is hoping for from him. “That’s... that’s alright, Tommy. Take your time.”

“I want to talk about Wil.”

Phil stops, setting aside the dish in his hands. “Oh.”

“Do you—” Tommy has kept the blanket around his shoulders, he holds onto the fabric tightly, rocking back in his chair. He doesn’t look at Phil. He stares at the mug of tea, at his

reflection in it with something almost like loathing. He thinks of a bloody tooth on a workbench. He thinks of how much time he spent dead and how much time Wilbur spent alive. He thinks of how bored Dream got in the slightest of lulls and how he tended to alleviate that boredom. Tommy has no idea to what extent Dream hurt Wilbur and he's starting to think he never will know. It's a different sort of haunting. "Do you want to know what happened to your son, Phil?"

Phil is frozen. He feels like he already knows too much. Tommy had told him what he had died for. Still, he wants more. He wants to know every bit of it so it can sink into him like a disease and never let go. Whatever part of Wilbur he can hold onto, he'll do it.

"Tommy, you can tell me, but please don't do this because you want to hurt yourself. If you need to tell someone, I will listen. But don't—" Phil sighs. His heart aches. Phil is immortal. Loss is unavoidable, but he also doesn't know how to explain how to keep on living when you lose someone, because honestly? He doesn't know how he does it. Really, it's like he doesn't know how to stop. "Wil kept things from me, and there are parts of him and his life and his choices that I never got the chance to understand, but Wilbur wouldn't want you to throw your life away like this." He doesn't know if he believes this himself, but he hopes it's true. He hopes his son was something of what Phil had once thought he was.

If Tommy could burn into that table with a look he would. His jaw is set and tense and for a split second he considers throwing the mug at Phil's head. He doesn't move. "Yeah. Well, I knew Wil too. And he wouldn't want you to be angry with yourself, but here we are, eh?"

Tommy doesn't actually know that. He has no idea how Wilbur would feel about Phil's anger. All Tommy knows is Phil feels responsible for what happened to Wilbur and he's letting it eat away at him. He knew pointing it out would wound Phil, both true and kind and cruel all at once, the same way Phil's words had done to him.

"Okay, Tommy," Phil sits down across from him. "What happened to my son?"

Tommy laughs, a hoarse and sharp, because he hadn't expected Phil to give in. Finally, he looks that man in the eyes. Those eyes are so old. Maybe as old as Tommy's are now.

"I... I don't really know, Phil," he sits back in his chair, at ease the way a man on a sinking ship is at ease, he sits with the inevitable. "In the grand scheme of things? I have no fucking idea what Dream did to Wilbur."

"Then why'd you bring it up?" Phil asks pointedly.

Tommy stares up at the ceiling. His ankle hurts. He's still angry that he'd failed, and more so that he has no idea what to do. Phil has knives in his kitchen. Phil is an old man. Tommy could get a knife before Phil could stop him, surely. *Right. Against an Angel of Death, you and your broken ankle are gonna stab yourself, eh? What a joke.*

"Did you all find a tooth anywhere?"

"What?" Phil leans forward, puzzled and more than a little horrified.



“Like, on Dream. Or somewhere in the vault. You probably didn’t, I’m guessing he got rid of it. He liked his trophies– bet you all figured that out,” Tommy scoffs. “But he didn’t need trophies for me and Wil. He already *had* us. I just– I brought it up ‘cause I first saw that Wil was there– I mean, I didn’t *know* it, then. I was a bit fuckin’ busy to question it much, but I saw a bloody tooth. And, well. Now I know that must’ve been Wilbur.”

Phil wishes this were a productive anger. There’s nothing he can do, no one to fight, no project to work on. He must sit with the fact that Dream hurt his son and Phil couldn’t save him.

Tommy doesn’t seem to notice Phil’s apprehension, continuing on without mercy. “Other than that I never really saw Wil. Not alive, anyway. Not until the last day.”

Phil doesn’t even know what to ask. Until he does. “What about... what about while dead? Is he...” Phil knows what he wants to ask, but from everything he’s seen about Tommy, he fears he knows the answer. *Is he happy?* He can’t.

Tommy knows exactly what Phil wants him to say. He refuses to lie to the man. “By the end of it, Limbo– where you go when you’re dead, it was better. But yeah. Wilbur is still alone, trapped in one room. Forever. It’s been... it’s been years since he last saw me by now,” Tommy is thinking about that tower. How he’s so weak and pathetic now he can’t even kill himself properly. So Wilbur is still alone.

Phil actually smiles. “I know what you were trying to do, Tommy. Why you...” Phil looks toward the window in the direction of the tower. “I’m... I’m glad my son had such a good friend. But I stand by what I said. Wilbur wouldn’t want this for you. He’d want you to... to keep going.”

Tommy thinks of Wilbur’s explanations, for why he killed himself in the first place and tried to take L’Manberg with him. *It was supposed to be a clean break.*

How come no one understands that for Tommy there can *never* be a break? When Tommy loves something, it never lets go of him. Not the discs, not Henry, not L’Manberg, not Tubbo, and certainly not Wilbur. *You were learning to live without Wilbur.* If that’s a possibility for him, Tommy still knows he’ll never be able to live as he once had. He’s not just injured, he’s lost a limb. And as Dream had so violently taught him all those months ago, limbs don’t grow back.

“Right,” Tommy stays cold, but it’s a weak shield. It would be easier if he couldn’t feel anything, but the fact of the matter is he’s never been able to stop caring. He’ll lie instead, even if Phil doesn’t believe his sarcasm, his brooding, he should at least know enough to back off. “Thanks for that, Phil. I’ll take it under consideration.”

Tommy wants to be left alone. He wants to sit in his misery without someone looking over him waiting for him to break. He also knows his recent efforts mean that that won’t be happening any time soon. Yet again Tommy’s last ditch efforts at exerting his own autonomy over Dream have backfired spectacularly, so yet again Tommy can’t even exist without someone else there to make sure he doesn’t take his own life into his hands. His life is supposed to be *his*. And it still doesn’t feel like it is.

~

“Tubbo?” Ranboo knocks first.

“What?” Tubbo opens the door sharply, defiant, waiting to defend himself.

“It’s... It’s just me,” is all Ranboo can think to say.

Tubbo stares at him, just below his eyeline, of course, frozen in thought. So many thoughts stir just below the surface.

*I’m not apologizing.*

*What the fuck was he thinking?*

*Are you okay?*

Tubbo just falls forward, pulling Ranboo into a hug. He hadn’t noticed he was shaking until Ranboo holding him finally helps him stabilize. The door swings shut, blocking out the cold and the sun until it’s just the two of them in the world. Tubbo doesn’t know what to do with himself. He wants to be hugging *Tommy* right now, to know that he is alive and tangible and *safe* but he can’t even fucking look at his best friend without thinking that Tommy was going to leave him. He *knows* it isn’t fair, he *knows* this isn’t about him, Tommy’s first death– the first death for Tubbo, at least– he couldn’t blame Tommy for leaving him because *he* left him to exile first. And now? Tommy’s newest efforts are still a product of what Tubbo had done– or had at the very least had done nothing to prevent– but that doesn’t stop that Tubbo is so *angry* and hurt because how can he trust Tommy not to leave him again?

*How can he trust you not to hurt him, then?*

He’s just *stuck*.

“Tubbo? Can you... can you not hold on so tight?” Ranboo asks weakly.

“Oh, shit– Sorry, bossman–” Tubbo quickly steps back. “Are you..?” Tubbo stops, taking a shaky breath. “Thank you. Thank you for taking care of him.” He refocuses. “Wait– Where is he? Who’s with him?”

“I left him with Phil. He’ll look after him. Don’t worry, I didn’t just leave him there,” Ranboo says quickly.

“Well, I’d say I’m the last fucking person who gets to judge you for leaving him,” Tubbo says bitterly, leaning back against his dining table. He woke up less than an hour ago and he feels exhausted.

“Actually, Tommy sent me. Or... he told me I should go after you,” Ranboo says. He isn’t sure if that was supposed to stay between him and Tommy, but it felt like the right thing to say.

“Oh,” Tubbo doesn’t know what to make of that. Tubbo’s voice trembles as he holds back a sob. “I am *so* angry with him, Ranboo. What the hell do I *do* with that?”

“Okay,” Ranboo doesn’t really know what to do either. He sits beside Tubbo. “I mean... I guess you just feel it, then? I dunno.”

“I don’t know *how* to *just feel it*. I don’t know how to just feel *anything*,” Tubbo says ruefully.

They sit in silence, Tubbo with nothing more to say, and Ranboo without answers. Ranboo goes to take Tubbo’s hand before stopping himself. “I’d... give it time. Sometimes that’s all you can do, right?” Ranboo offers.

“Right– *Time*,” Tubbo scoffs. “Time isn’t gonna fix this. And I’m–” He can’t say it aloud. If he says it aloud that makes it more real, but he can’t stop the thought from rising up either way. *I’m starting to think nothing will.*

~

Days continue to slip past and still, Tommy remains alive. Whether he wants to be or not. And Tubbo stays away.

No one says it, not overtly, but Tommy isn’t allowed to be alone anymore. He’s not a *prisoner*, exactly. In fact, most of his babysitters do their best to get him out and about, to do whatever he wants, but it doesn’t make Tommy feel any less trapped. He had broken their trust and therefore he’s yet again lost his autonomy.

Phil is pretty good at giving him space, despite them currently living together. He’ll leave Tommy alone up in the loft of his little house. He also keeps careful count of the knives in the drawer, but Tommy doesn’t call him out on it. Tommy does his physical therapy. He sort of hates it, it hurts, it feels like actual work, but he can’t pretend it doesn’t help. It’s been just over a week, and already the daily ritual makes his leg feel less stiff. Still sore, but it feels more like a limb that actually belongs to him than dead weight.

Phil joins him, as he’d said he would, and Tommy can’t help but stare at black feathers cut through by burn scars. Normally Phil keeps his wings folded in close. Tommy realizes he hasn’t ever actually seen the full extent of the burns, only known that Phil can’t fly anymore. Tommy hates that looking at those burns all he can think is *Wilbur is the cause of that*.

Yet again, it’s like the whole universe is telling him *move on move on move on move on*.

And Tommy still doesn’t know how.

He wants Tubbo back.

“You should talk to him,” Phil is perfectly logical, sitting beside him on the front steps overlooking New L’Manberg. It’s dusk now, the lanterns illuminating the platforms as the rest of the world darkens.

“I’m not fucking apologizing.”

“I never said anything about apologizing. I said you should *talk* to him,” Phil says pointedly.

Tommy glowers. “Why should I be the one to go to him first? He’s the one who ran away from *me* instead of talking about shit.”

“I mean, is Tubbo *really* the one who ran away in this whole situation?” Phil says carefully, looking over at Tommy. He doesn’t want to think about how familiar this all feels. Sitting on the front porch with a pouty, scrawny teenager trying to figure out how to make up with someone he had fought with. He wishes things were as simple now as they had been back then.

“I guess not,” Tommy mutters bitterly.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Phil says teasingly. “If you go talk to him first, you keep an open mind, you two will work things out. I know Tubbo will meet you halfway.”

“Oooh old man Philza. So wise and old,” Tommy replies mockingly.

“Oy, *shut*,” Phil snaps without any real anger behind it.

Tommy laughs. A pause, Tommy looking toward the sunset, toward Snowchester almost nervous. “Yeah. Yeah, alright. I’ll... I’ll go talk to him.”

“I’ll walk you,” Phil gets to his feet, stretching wearily.

“Oh, such a nice offer, Phil, I think I’ll accept. I know you won’t take no for an answer in case I... I fuckin’ change my mind halfway there and try and drown myself in the ocean...” Tommy grumbles, standing to follow him. “Didn’t realize we were going *now*.”

“Well, when did *you* want to go then?” Phil gives him a look.

“Some time not now...” Tommy says. He’s off his crutches. That’s something. The cane is still useful, even if his limp isn’t as bad anymore. He wonders if this is what Phil feels like when he has to walk everywhere, if every step is frustratingly tedious because he remembers when he could do so much better.

Tommy holds his resolve up until he’s on Tubbo’s front porch.

“I can stay, you know,” Phil says when he sees Tommy pause.

“Nah. I’ll... I’ll be with Tubbo. I’ll be good. You should just go.”

“Alright, mate. You just message me when you want to come back and I’ll come pick you up, okay?”

“Come pick me up...” Tommy scoffs bitterly. He’s not even allowed to walk anywhere alone, then. “Yeah, whatever, fine.”

“Good luck,” Phil pats his shoulder before heading down the steps and back into the snow.

Tommy remembers the commonly accepted rule since his return as Phil walks away from him alone. Phil is strong, but Tommy can't help but worry. "Be careful, alright?"

Phil turns back and gives him a nod. "I will, Tommy. Promise."

Tommy knocks.

"I said I was fine, Ranboo, you've helped enough—" A very haggard Tubbo answers the door, his hair is a mess, sticking up in the back, his clothes a wrinkled mess, and the bags under his eyes dark. Now they widen in surprise. "Tommy."

"Er, yeah. Hullo," Tommy gives him an awkward nod. Tubbo doesn't say anything, just stares. "Can I... Can I come in? It's fucking cold out here."

"Yeah, yeah sure," Tubbo steps back, still watching him like he's seen a ghost.

"You, uh. You should clean up, Tubbo," Tommy as per usual completely lacks tact. Tubbo's cabin is a mess. Open books are strewn about the place, several laid out on the kitchen table and more alongside dirty dishes piled on the counter. "Wait... what's..?" Tommy stares at it all, almost uncomprehending. Those are Dream's books. No longer shoved in a pile by the fireplace, but unpacked and covered in scraps of paper that Tommy recognizes as Tubbo's handwriting.

"What're you doing here?" Tubbo asks.

"I..." Tommy trails off, lost in thought as he tries to process what he's seeing. It had been over a week since he'd seen Tubbo, since Tubbo had left him, angry and hurting. Tubbo had been holed up here, taking over Tommy's job of trying to figure out revival stuff. "You... you did all this?" Unspoken, *you did all this for me?*

"Er, yeah," Tubbo almost looks embarrassed by what Tommy can only take as a physical reminder of how much Tubbo loves him, of how much he's willing to do for him, angry or not. "You... you okay?"

"I've been... I've been staying with Phil. In L'Manberg."

"Yeah, I know," Tubbo stares at him, like he's trying to read something from his expression, some sign of why Tommy is there.

Tommy sighs. "I... I didn't do it 'cause I wanted to leave you, you know. It wasn't supposed to be permanent."

"What?"

Tommy scuffs his feet on the floor, unwilling to meet Tubbo's gaze. "I... I had a plan, see? Dream would come after me, bring me back like he always does. It wasn't supposed to be permanent, okay? I... I had a note, to... to explain shit. Do you..." Tommy searches his pockets, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper, the ink smudged slightly by water stains.

"Here."

Tubbo stares at it like Tommy had just offered him a dead animal.

“I don’t... I don’t want that,” Tubbo says, tense, like he’s holding back far less calm words.

“Oh. Right,” Tommy quickly takes it back. “I... I haven’t been carrying it around, you know, like a fuckin’ creep, I was just talking about some shit with Phil and I had it and... well. Dunno why I thought you... it was stupid of me to offer that.”

“Right,” Tubbo turns away, resting his hands on the counter like his knees have gone a little weak. “Right...”

“Tubbo?” Tommy asks worriedly.

“Y-You... You had a *note* for me,” Tubbo says it like he’s fighting not to be sick.

“I mean, yeah. I would’ve told you in person if I hadn’t thought you’d try to stop me,” Tommy seems to think the problem is that a note is too impersonal, not the note existing at all.

“And, what, did you think a note would make me feel better?” Tubbo says. He sounds cold. The kind of harsh rationality he had when he’d exiled Tommy, that coldness a desperate mask for hurt.

“Well, I...” Tommy doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know how to cope with Tubbo’s quiet anger. It still feels dangerous.

“The night before— Tommy, when you were— What was that, huh?” Tubbo turns back to face him and Tommy hates himself for at first thinking Tubbo would return with a knife.

“What..?” Tommy tries to shake off the thought.

“The night before, Tommy,” Tubbo repeats. “What was that? When you— And— Oh god...” Tubbo puts a hand to his mouth. He’s tired of feeling weak.

“I... I wanted to spend time with you,” Tommy shrugs helplessly. “I wanted to... to know you had a good last memory with me, just in case, y’know?”

“Fuck you, Tommy,” Tubbo’s anger is genuine, but so is his hurt. “You think I’d be able to cherish that fucking night knowing the whole time you were still going to— to *do* that?”

Tommy shrugs, smiling sadly, exhausted and weary, but still not ashamed. “What else was I supposed to do, Tubbo?”

Tubbo sighs. “Fuck— I— I get it, I do. I’m not stupid, I know why you did it, so. So I need to make sure you never feel like you have to do that again. I just...” Tubbo gestures frustratedly to the mess of his home. “It’s fucking hard! It’s... it’s hard.”

“You... you get it, do you?” Tommy asks. He’s not trying to sound accusing, but he can’t help it.

Tubbo looks at him, with grim acceptance. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“So, you know I wasn’t learning to live without Wil. Not before, not now, not ever, eh? I dunno how to explain it. Revival shit changed everything, sure. And... and how I feel about Wil, that changed too, but even before, okay?” Tommy knows this confession won’t make things better, but he feels like he owes Tubbo this. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t doing better and then all the sudden I was exiled and it hit me *quick*, Tubbo. It took... it took *days* for that ledge to get more... appealing or whatever the fuck. The way I am now. It’s not *new*, okay? At least not this part of it. You wouldn’t know that, though, ‘cause you weren’t there for those days. You were... you were busy trying to keep everyone together.”

Tubbo nods. “Okay.”

“Okay? Okay what?”

“You’re still my best friend. I mean all of you, not just the bits I knew about or remembered or whatever, okay? If this is how you are now, then okay. I’m with you.”

“Thank you, Tubbo,” Tommy means it, but it’s clear he hasn’t taken Tubbo’s words to heart, not properly. He leans against the counter beside Tubbo, lost in thought.

“What is it, Tommy?”

Tommy stares at the floor, at his tattered sneakers beside Tubbo’s socks. Despite whatever harsh words they had said to each other, months of distance and time changing things more than not, Tommy still feels that there’s nothing easier than standing beside him. So he says it. The cruel truth that had gotten Tommy up on that tower. Maybe Tommy had learned death didn’t mean anything after the hundredth time Dream put a knife in his back, but the truth of it is, Tommy had known it didn’t matter if he lived or died long before then. “The Tommyinnit that you knew before? I... I don’t think he came back. When I died, I think he stayed gone. Not even in limbo. Just gone.”

Tubbo can’t help but think back on a little boy who’d chased bees and discs alongside his best friend, who’d joined him in a country and then a war. He’d started changing and he hadn’t stopped. Tubbo doesn’t know if he can see that person within himself anymore.

“I can’t know all of it, but I think I... I think I know what you mean,” Tubbo says.

“Well, in that case, I’m sorry,” Tommy mutters. “It fucking sucks.”

“Yeah, it does,” Tubbo says. “But at least we’re— Whoever we are now—” He doesn’t know how to say it. To explain that at the very least, if those two boys running wild in the early days of the SMP could see them now, they’d at least know something turned out alright. It hasn’t been easy, but they’re still beside each other. “I’m glad to have you. Whoever you are now and whoever I am, I’m glad.”

It shouldn’t change anything. Mere words are insignificant in the grand scheme of their many tragedies, but Tubbo’s words still matter. Maybe Tommy can’t put any faith in his own life for himself, but he’ll take being worth something to Tubbo. At least for another day.

“You’re a good friend, Tubbo.” Maybe Tommy should’ve thanked Tubbo for his kindness, but this feels more important. Something he doesn’t want Tubbo to doubt.

Tubbo laughs, wiping his eyes quickly. “Good. Because you’re stuck with me. Christ, have we gotten old, huh?”

“Well, technically I’m older than you now!” Tommy teases.

“Are you?” Tubbo raises an eyebrow at him.

“Well, I didn’t age, I don’t think? I mean, Wilbur didn’t. But, I lived it– Or, I guess I didn’t! But still, I’ve got to have at least a year on you by now, eh?” Tommy says smugly.

“No way. I am still the oldest. I’ve been a *president*, Tommy. Responsibility like that ages you!” Tubbo argues back.

“Oh *sure*, bee boy. Whatever you say.”

It’s nice to just bicker, but they can’t deny what that actually means. Tommy is older now. Maybe it feels more like a year had been stolen from him.

“Let’s... Let’s not count that time, eh? I don’t want that to count,” Tommy says. “You’re still older than me. I’ve decided.”

“Fine, fine. You stay seventeen,” Tubbo says. “We’re still the same age for a few more months.”

Tommy laughs, “sixteen, you mean.”

Tubbo looks up at him with that crestfallen look, something beyond pity, more like horror, or something indescribably in between. Tommy knows that look well by now. It’s a look someone gives him when they don’t know how to tell him how messed up he is.

*Oh.*

Tommy looks away from that gaze. He doesn’t need it to remind him how wrong everything about him has become. Tommy stares down at his scarred knuckles, clenching them into a fist, stopping when his nails start to dig in. His voice feels disconnected from whatever storm is stirring inside of him, he sounds steady. He knows he’s not. “I’m... I’m not sixteen anymore.” Tommy looks back up at his best friend, his grey-blue eyes somewhere between numb and desperate for Tubbo to tell him he’s wrong. “Am I?”

“No, Tommy. You’re not,” Tubbo says softly. “I am... so sorry.”

And Tommy laughs. Tubbo is staring at him like he’s afraid this is going to send him over the ledge again, and all Tommy can do is laugh. It’s a funny thing. His friend apologizing for telling him his age. He supposes it makes sense. Time kept moving while he was alive too. And it’s been a long time, so. “I’m... I’m seventeen, then?”

“Yeah. You’re seventeen, bossman.”



Funny.

~

Tommy still isn't left alone anymore. Tommy does his best not to resent them for it. And he knows it probably wouldn't be very reassuring if he told them he *thinks* he *probably* won't off himself at the first opportunity because it would hurt his friends, but that's all he has to give.

There's a steady rotation of familiar faces. Tubbo and Ranboo most of the time, but also Phil, Eret— sometimes with Foolish, Jack and Niki once or twice albeit very awkwardly, Techno with Phil once, Puffy a few times, Sam surprisingly often, sometimes with Ponk and sometimes without. Sam shows up and tries to get him to build stuff, to do a project, something like that. Tommy always grumbles and asks him why he isn't trailing after Ponk, to which Sam replies that Ponk is with another friend, so they're safe. That's how Sam always describes it, not that they're busy somewhere else, but that they're *safe*.

"I know Puffy isn't a real shrink, but you might want to talk to her, eh?" Tommy gives Sam a look. "People say me and Tubbo are clingy..."

Sam frowns. "I'm fine, actually. I was saying *you* might want to talk to her."

Tommy shrugs. "I don't think she's qualified to deal with," Tommy gestures to himself. "Whatever the fuck this is."

Sam doesn't have a decent retort to that one. "...alright, fair enough," Sam sighs. "So, you feeling up to helping me with the Holy Lands?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine," Tommy rolls his eyes. "You're so anxious about it, like. Come on, man, Church Prime protects itself. It doesn't *need* walls."

"Well, just do it with me anyway, please?" Sam asks.

"Fuckin' *fine*, let me get my stuff," Tommy trudges back toward his house, leaving Sam on the prime path. He whines, but it's been... stabilizing. To have something to work towards these past few days.

Tommy still uses the cane, but it feels like less of a necessity. He's not going to go running any time soon, but Tommy has made progress remarkably fast. Phil making sure he's doing his physical therapy every day is definitely a contributing factor. Tommy's leg doesn't hurt as much, and Ranboo says he doesn't really notice Tommy limping anymore. It's still annoying how much work it takes for Tommy to be less than what he was before, but he can't say he isn't a little proud, that he doesn't feel a little less helpless knowing some parts of what happened to him can be tangibly repaired.

Tommy gets his things together. When he turns around to leave, a smiling white mask lurks above him.

Sam came running the moment Tommy screamed, his sword at the ready. Sam hesitates, frozen and panicked, as Tommy is pressed to the wall clutching his chest, looking white as a

sheet, staring at a little girl who hovers in the air across from him.

“T-Tommy-?” Sam stares between the two of them with wide eyes. “Are you– Are you hurt?”

Tommy shakes his head, not trusting himself to speak yet. He’s currently doing his best not to pass out or be sick. He’d rather not greet Drista by puking on her.

“I can’t believe I scared you!” Drista laughs, seemingly oblivious to the very real damage she’d caused.

“You’re...” Sam catches on, lowering his sword.

“D-Drista,” Tommy says hoarsely. “B-Been a while, huh?” Tommy laughs weakly. He cannot look at her face. He’s shaking so bad Tommy feels like he might fall over, but it wasn’t Dream. It wasn’t him. It was just Drista. Strange how all of Tommy’s recklessness to draw Dream out into the open, and for that split second he thought he was there, Tommy had wanted nothing more than to get as far away as possible, same with Ranboo on the edge of the tower. Tommy is both looking for Dream and views the mere thought of the encounter as something beyond terror.

“Yep! You look different,” Drista makes an astute observation. “I was bored and wanted to do something! Come on,” Drista nods back outside.

“...Tommy,” Sam doesn’t seem to know what to do in this situation.

“I’m... I’m fine, Sam. I’m good. She’s– Drista is fine, I just thought for a second– You know, I’m fine,” Tommy takes a shaky breath. “A-Actually, could I not help you today?”

“I really shouldn’t...” Sam shuffles from foot to foot, still with one hand on his sword.

“Come on, man,” Tommy waves him off. “Drista can protect me. She’s a god or whatever, eh? No offense, but I’m getting a little sick of you all.”

Sam considers this for a moment. “Okay, she can stop Dream, but...”

Tommy groans irritably. “Oh my *god*, Sam, might as well get to the point– Drista,” Tommy almost turns to face her again before instead quickly turning in a circle back to Sam, instead resolving to look at the ground Drista is currently hovering over. “Drista, Sam wants to know if you’re gonna stop me from killing myself.”

“*Tommy*, oh my god, w-well, you–” Sam stammers.

“Am I wrong?” Tommy gives him a look.

Drista folds her arms over her chest. “Ew. I’m not going to let you *die*. Why would I do that?”

“There, see?” Tommy nods. He ignores the pang of bitterness that comes with how she said that. *Let you die*. Tommy is tired of his life not quite feeling like his own. “Now you can

stop babysitting.”

“I don’t know if I should...” Sam still hesitates.

“Well it’s not up to you, now is it?” Tommy snaps. “You’re not the boss of me. I don’t belong to you or anyone else. So, quit being a dick and just fuck off for the afternoon, ey?”

Sam clams up at this. There is no comfortable way for him to continue protesting. “Okay, okay. I’ll... I’m gonna let Tubbo know. And I’ll be over by church prime, so if you need *anything*—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll give you a shout,” Tommy waves him out irritably. Sam leaves. Tommy still doesn’t look at Drista’s face. “Can’t promise I’ll be good company, Drista. I’ve been... having a rough go of it since you last saw me,” is how Tommy decides to put it.

“Well, don’t you want to go outside?”

“I guess,” Tommy follows her out of his home. He had actually been enthused by the thought of hanging out with someone new, someone who didn’t look at him like he was a kicked puppy, but he also is heavily reminded that his current pace of life and Drista’s had shifted radically.

“You walk slow now,” Drista waits impatiently by the tunnel towards L’Manberg.

“Yeah, I’ve aged,” Tommy grumbles.

“Let’s blow stuff up!” Drista drifts ahead without waiting.

“N-No—” Tommy says, trying to catch up as he sees her summon TNT from who knows where. “Please, Drista, don’t.”

He can’t see her face, but he’d wager Drista looks surprised as she puts it away, but she obliges. He’s grateful for that at least. Drista isn’t exactly here for compassion and understanding, though.

“Come on! Why don’t you want to do anything?” Drista whines. “You’re all boring now. Don’t you want to build a big ugly tower or something?”

“I don’t want to right now, Drista. We’ve got to... I can’t go anywhere alone right now. It’s not safe,” Tommy mutters.

“What do you mean?” Drista’s assesses him carefully through that haunting mask of hers.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Tommy says quickly. He doesn’t really feel like explaining his recent suicidal tendencies to *Drista* of all people. “...But Dream is sneaky and shit. He’s still out there.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that anymore,” Drista seems entirely unaware of the significance of what she had just said.

Tommy freezes. “What’d you mean, Drista?”

“XD took him.”

“ *Took* Dream? What’d you mean? He *killed* him?”

“Yeah, if that makes sense to you, sure,” Drista shrugs. “He’s not alive anymore, technically.”

“*Technically*? Drista, I’m asking about *Dream*, not DreamXD.”

“Yeah, duh. XD took Dream away. He’s gone.”

He’s gone.

And so is the revive book.

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, okay I thought we were going to get to the "dawn" part this chapter, but that, uh. That clearly didn't happen ;)

Hope you all had fun with that.

# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

CW: suicidal thoughts, grief, panic attacks, more grief, mild self harm, oh and grief.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Drista stares at him, waiting for a response. Tommy feels like the ground has been knocked out from underneath him, like yet again he is in freefall. Tommy presses a hand into the side of the tunnel. He doesn't know what this feeling is, if it's relief or loss.

"So, he's gone," it isn't really dawning on Tommy, not properly. His voice sounds so calm, so disconnected from himself. "Why'd DreamXD want him?"

"Thought it'd be *obvious*. "

"Well it's not," Tommy's shock is overtaken by irritation. Drista is so callous, she has no *idea* what she has just changed by telling him this. "And this is *kind* of important to me, so."

"I mean, it has to do with you! You're a crime, Tommy!" Drista continues on cheerfully, like she's giving him some badge of honor.

Tommy feels panic rising. Finally he is no longer being hunted, it cannot be so something else can take Dream's place. "I-Is XD gonna come after me?"

"*What?*" Drista laughed. "Why would he do that?"

"You *said* I was a fucking *crime*, Drista—"

"Yeah, but that's not *your* fault," Drista scoffs, like it should be obvious. "*Dream* was the one messing with the natural order of things. XD intervening to kill you again wouldn't make sense, I mean, no offense, Tommy, I like you, but you're like. Way below his awareness. You're the pebble Dream was using to break the mortal machine. You don't hurt the *pebble*."

"The pebble..." Tommy trails off, lost in thought. "I don't— I don't understand."

"You haven't *noticed?*" Drista teases. "How weird it's gotten? I saw that ghost guy with you last time."

"And?"

Drista laughs at him. "Ghosts aren't *real*. Duh. I guess they are right now, but they're not *supposed* to be. That ghost you had with you is supposed to be part of the dead guy, but dead

people are all..." Drista presses her palms together. "...Squished together because Dream broke the game board! Or, I guess not squished together, more like broken apart, they keep on swapping places like crazy and some of you, your souls stay intact somehow and you *don't* get a ghost at all. Who knows what *that's* all about."

"Ghostbur— he isn't—" Tommy has no idea what to even ask. This is all just too much.

"Look, think of it like... Like when you put a cup on the table and there's a ring of water when you pick it back up? The water is supposed to be in the cup. Ghostbur is the ring on the table. If we fixed it, the water would be back in the cup."

Tommy stares at her, the mask still sending chills down his spine, but honestly he's too distracted to care. "That makes no fucking sense."

"That's because mortals are stupid."

"Right," Tommy scoffs. The rest of their current conversation catches up with a feeling in his chest he can't quite fathom. "...Is XD gonna punish Dream, then?"

"I mean, he already is. That's why he took him away. XD can't really do much *here*, he'd break your little bubble of reality if he did, that's why he usually messes with you guys in your dreams. If he did stuff here it would like, break important stuff. So Dream had to go with him!"

"What's he gonna do to him, Drista?" Tommy isn't sure why he's asking, with all the far more important connotations that come with that information, but he can't help himself.

Drista looks back at him, still drifting through the air, but the silence of her gaze, even behind a mask, Tommy knows he won't be getting an answer. He probably doesn't want one. Tommy shivers.

"Wait," Tommy shakes his head to clear the fog, "all these months, why'd he wait til now to get him? He's a *god* inne? So why didn't he take him right when he revived me one too many times?"

"Now, do *not* tell him I told you this," she says pointedly. "For your sake, not mine. But *I* think he put it off because he wanted to wait until someone was coming to get you. See, it was probably a little fun to watch you and Dream doing whatever, I dunno much about it, *he* always told me to go away when I tried to come," Drista says gloomily. Tommy hates what every word she says reveals about XD. "But he's actually a big softie. So, he couldn't just take Dream and send you home, or at least he was *reluctant* to, so he waited until he knew you were gonna be safe, then he took him!"

"But why didn't XD just save me if he's a god?"

"Probably couldn't be bothered."

"Oh." Tommy can't help the spark of hatred that rises toward XD. He's grateful, he thinks, that Dream is being punished. But it feels worthless knowing his torture, his humiliation, his

decay, it was all witnessed by a being who could have saved him. And he didn't. Worse, from what Drista said, XD had *fun* watching him and Dream. But in the same breath he must have known it was wrong, at least enough that he didn't let his little sister see it.

Drista just keeps talking, seemingly enjoying knowing so much about something Tommy knows nothing about. "I mean not just that, but like, at first I don't think he minded. When you people die, XD feeds on that energy, you know?"

No. No, Tommy doesn't know. He nods anyway.

"So, you and then later that other guy dying all the time, it was easy food. But like, you all got used up pretty quick because he was doing it so much. You two kept on getting put in that pocket dimension that broke open when all this happened. Dream was basically giving XD junk food constantly. Like, at some point that's just rude."

Tommy shivers. Dream's disappearance, maybe it was timed with his rescue or whatever, but Drista seems more confident that really XD just got sick of *feeding* on his and Wilbur's suffering. There's something oddly vindicating about knowing that Limbo is an unnatural, broken afterlife, even if it still seems like the one they'll be stuck with.

"S-So, Dream is gone? Forever? XD isn't gonna like... I dunno, drop him off after his sentence or whatever?" Tommy presses a hand to his forehead. A pounding headache has joined the tumultuous thoughts.

Drista laughs. "Yeah, right. Let him go after his *sentence*. When XD gets bored he'll probably just get rid of him. Or leave him wherever he's... you know," Drista says.

"So, XD is probably... probably hurting him?" Tommy wants to know. Maybe he shouldn't, but he wants to know if Dream's suffering can match up to his own.

Drista sighs, annoyed. "I can't *explain it* to someone like you. It would break your stupid little brain."

"...You don't know what he's doing to him, do you?"

"No!" Drista pushes him so hard he almost falls over. "I know more than you do."

Tommy leans back against the wall, staring at the ground. Why'd she have to *push* him? With that horrible mask on?

"Why do you look like that, Drista? Why *that* mask?" Tommy can't help but ask.

"I don't know. It looks like my brother's," she shrugs.

"Right..." Tommy doesn't know what to make of that. Everything he's heard about XD so far makes it very unlikely that choice in wardrobe was mere coincidence. Dream had wanted to be a god, surely he would craft himself a mask as a reflection of them.

"I think he did it after he saw that first human," Drista says.

Tommy shivers. “What human, Drista?”

“The first one on this server. Dream,” Drista says like it’s obvious.

“So... So XD looks like that, because *Dream* looks like that?” Tommy stares out at the horizon, his dread only deepening.

“Yeah. I guess.”

Tommy hadn’t imagined this could get worse, but knowing the gods had crafted their forms in *Dream’s image*- that bastard would sure get a kick out of that, he already thinks he’s a god...

*Drista actually is a god, Tommy. Last I heard, you need a god.*

That voice in the back of his head sounds painfully like Wilbur.

Tommy feels like he’s covered in pins and needles, the restlessness of Limbo returning to him in his time of need, “Drista, so, if XD knows about Limbo– Could he go to Limbo?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“...Could *you*?”

Drista continues to drift through the air, still seeming gloomy. “I’m not *allowed* to. This is my brother’s world. I’m only allowed to visit it sometimes. Let alone the other places.”

“But... okay, Drista. I– I need your help,” Tommy feels desperation intermingle with his shock. He still has a chance, right? He has to.

Drista steps– or rather, drifts– further away from him. “...What do you want?”

Tommy knows asking Drista for something is just as likely to result in her blowing him up for the hell of it, especially when he asks for something so monumental. Drista doesn’t like pride, or people thinking they deserve her powers to be used for their own benefit. Tommy lost his pride a long time ago. He can only beg.

“Wilbur– That other guy, the other one Dream was killing? H-He stayed dead,” Tommy steps closer, hands clasped in front of him. Now Tommy looks at her face. Tommy is adept at pleading with that soulless smile leering above him. “So– So if you could, if you could bring him back– just one more time! Or... or give me a revive book. I promise I won’t make copies, please, I just need the one.”

“It doesn’t matter if you *promise*. XD took all the copies. And I dunno what was in it. Book stuff is boring,” Drista continues to drift backward down the prime path, floating above the steep staircase down to L’Manberg. “You’re like, extra sad and weird today.”

Tommy almost laughs. “Yeah– Yeah, I sure fucking am– Drista, this is– this is so important. More important than anything else to me right now. I’ve been– I’ve been a good friend, haven’t I?” Tommy continues to stumble forward, looking up at her.



“I guess,” Drista still sounds irritated, and far from sympathetic. “I don’t know if you count as a friend, but okay. I’ll let you say that.”

“I will never ask for anything ever again. Dream brought Wil and me back over and over again– what’s one more time, eh?”

“I mean, but that wasn’t *supposed* to happen. XD got annoyed about it.”

“A-And he’s your older brother! It’s your job to mess with him, right?” Tommy keeps following her, struggling to keep up as she lists over New L’Manberg.

“I mean, obviously. But it’s not as cool if it isn’t my idea. Stuff that comes from you people is stupid,” Drista sounds so fucking uninterested– Tommy hates this. He’s bargaining for Wilbur’s life and he has to sell it like some fun prank or game to try and convince this god to do one thing for him. He can’t hate her for it. Drista is still just a little girl who has never had to understand what it means to die. How can he blame her for being something he wishes he could be too?

“Okay, okay, er,” Tommy scrambles to think of another angle. “What if– What if I play with you, eh? We could play a game! A-And make a bet on it. So, if I win you bring back Wilbur. And if I lose, I’ll do whatever it is you want, okay?”

Drista considers this for a moment. “Hm. A game?”

Tommy feels a split second burst of hope.

“No. I don’t want to play a game right now,” Drista sighs. “Maybe if you hang out with me for a bit, I’ll think about it.”

Tommy’s hope withers and dies. “R-Right. Okay.” Tommy doesn’t know if Drista will actually even consider it, but what’s he supposed to do, just walk away? “What do you want to do, then, Drista?”

“I *wanted* to blow stuff up,” Drista pouts. “But *you* were being such a wimp about it.”

“O-Okay. We can do that! We can blow stuff up,” Tommy nods quickly, even as his heart flutters in his chest.

“Okay, good!” Drista seems more pleased now. “Not here. This stuff is already all blown up,” she gestures to all of New L’Manberg before heading up the hill, not bothering to wait for Tommy to keep up as he struggles to make the climb.

Tommy can do this. Yes, for all intents and purposes he has just found out Dream will never be able to hurt him again *and* that Wilbur is dead forever, those two things alone make his brain want to shut down, but he knows how to play a part even when his head is spinning. He’ll go with Drista and do as she asks. And then he’ll bargain for Wil at the first opportunity.

“S-So, what were you gonna blow up?” Tommy gets to the top of the hill just in time to see her laying down TNT through the hole in Fundy’s old house. “Oh.”

Drista doesn't even look back at him, just lights it.

"You're just gonna—" Tommy is on the ground before he can finish his sentence, the shock wave rattling through him, sound ringing in his ears, and Tommy curls in on himself, covering his ears, trembling. It wasn't the explosion itself that had shaken him like this, he hadn't really been close enough to feel it other than a bit of heat and noise, it's everything that he knows comes with an explosion.

*"Put your armor in the hole."*

Tommy can't breathe. His mind is overtaken by a panicked mantra, an echo of familiar fears, *you're dying. Right now. You know what dying feels like and this is it. You're going to die and then Dream is going to bring you back and he's going to hurt you—*

"Um, *hello?*"

Tommy screams, jolting away from where Drista leans over him. "P-Please don't— Please—" He raises one hand to keep her and that terrible mask away.

"You're kind of freaking me out," Drista says, stepping back. "What's wrong with you?"

Tommy struggles to catch his breath. "J-Just give me... give me a minute, *please.*"

"Alright, *fine.*" Drista kicks some rocks into the crater now replacing half of Fundy's old house.

Tommy shuts his eyes, tucking his head between his knees, trying anything to ground himself. His hands ball into fists, his nails digging into his palms. This time, he doesn't stop when it hurts. He digs in harder, that pain is a shock to the system, tugging him away from a darker spiral. It feels better than whatever stark grief is inside of him. Tommy clings to that pain, even as his hands shake, he digs in deeper.

"You're bleeding. Did you realize that?" Drista observes curiously.

Tommy doesn't say anything.

*You have to stop. You have to let go. Tommy, let go. Tommy— just please let go!*

Tommy stops, his knuckles aching from holding on so tight, his palms stinging as each has four crescent moons cut into them and sending blood dripping down his arms. Tommy doesn't want Wilbur's voice in his head, he wants *him*. His actual brother to be here and with him.

"Are you... done?" Drista asks.

Maybe Tommy is just imagining things, but he almost thinks Drista sounds concerned. He opens his eyes. The grass looks almost too bright, the lush green still foreign compared to the darkness of Limbo, the darkness of a cell. It's dotted with red now.

"Drista," Tommy's voice shakes. "Can we... can we not blow anything else up? Please?"

“Yeah, alright, fine,” Drista grumbles. “But now I wanna know what’s wrong with you. Are you like, sick or crazy or something?”

“Uh. Probably?” Tommy says weakly, wiping his bloody hands on his shirt.

“This is because that other guy is gone?” Drista says skeptically. “You’re mortals. Aren’t you like, used to each other not coming back? You *all* die.”

“I can’t– I can’t explain it, Drista. I had him. A-And he died, and then I had him again and then– He did some stuff, some good and some bad, but I had him back, okay? I did,” Tommy says intently, still staring at the bloody grass at his feet. “And t-then he– It’s just–” Tommy takes a shaking breath. He finally looks up at her, that mask hasn’t changed, but it’s like knowing there’s a different face behind those black eyes is enough. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose your big brother? *Twice?*”

Drista stares at him for a moment, she doesn’t say a thing. Her head tilts as she assesses him and Tommy tries to bury a shudder at the familiarity of that action.

Drista finally speaks. “...No. I don’t.” She doesn’t sound mocking, nor sympathetic, merely stating a fact.

“Right,” Tommy turns away again, pushing his hair out of his face and looking over New L’Manberg. “I’m sorry. I can’t– I can’t do any more explosions. But I’ll–”

“Ugh! Fine you’re boring, I’m going.”

“No, no hold on I can still hang out with you–” Tommy turns back to face her.

Drista is gone.

“Fuck– Please don’t– Please come back. Please!” Tommy shouts to the empty air. There is no reply. “Please help me,” Tommy says softly, voice shaking, he doesn’t know why he’s fighting back tears. His last hope had just vanished without even a goodbye. He’s more than earned a breakdown.

Dream is gone. Tommy has never been more free. Tommy doesn’t have to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, waiting for some inevitable hell to return to him. It’s over. All of it, the fear, the torment, the constant haunting knowledge that that monster is somewhere out there– it’s all over.

Tommy doesn’t move. He lays down beside yet another crater on this literally godforsaken server and stares up at a world too bright and too big for him. Still, he doesn’t move. He watches the clouds shift above, and wallows in the cruel thought, *it’s beautiful. It’s another beautiful thing you never thought you’d see again. That you know Wilbur never will see again.*

Tommy shuts his eyes. He doesn’t want to see it anymore.

*You failed, Tommy. You failed your brother.*

Tommy hears the crickets start to make noise. That's what tells him the sun is setting. It hadn't even been a day, and Tommy's entire reality had shifted on its axis.

Tommy hates himself for the genuine, fierce relief that comes over him, because at the exact same moment one cruel thought circles his head, not in Wilbur's voice, nor even Dream's, just his own.

*Now you don't have a reason not to bury him.*

~

**<Tubbo\_> Tommy where are you?**

**<Tubbo\_> Sam is freaking out**

**<Tubbo\_> he said he left u with Drista. So im guessing youre ok?**

**<Tubbo\_> Tommy please don't do this to me again. Please just tell me you're okay**

**<Tubbo\_> Please. Please for once in your fucking life check your comm.**

**<Tubbo\_> please don't be dead**

**<TommyInnit> im not dead.**

**<TommyInnit> Can you come get me?**

**<Tubbo\_> yes where are you**

**<TommyInnit> Over by L'Manberg. Up on the hill. Not at the tower don't worry.**

**<Tubbo\_> Be there soon**

Tubbo arrives out of breath and frantic. "Oh my *god*, Tommy, you- You can't do that to me. Fucking hell- how can you be such a dickhead sometimes?!" Tubbo collapses to his knees beside him. "You scared the shit out of me! What the fuck were you thinking wandering off alone?! Like, okay, I get you weren't out to hurt yourself, but what if *Dream* had--"

"He won't."

"...What?" Tubbo stops. He can hear it in Tommy's voice, he can hear that something has changed.

Tommy smiles in a way that leaves Tubbo far more concerned than relieved. "He won't. You'll never guess what I found out today, Tubbo," a weak laugh that sounds more like a sob. "Dream is *gone*."

"He's..."

"Yep! Gone. Totally gone. Apparently, DreamXD scooped him up same day you all rescued me. Funny, isn't it? And now he's rotting in hell or something. I dunno, Drista wasn't very

clear,” Tommy stares up at the growing dusk. “But... he’s gone. He’s suffering.”

A pause, Tubbo at a loss for words.

“Still won, though, dinne?”

“Tommy, I don’t... what are you talking about, bossman?”

“He still won,” Tommy still won’t look at him. He’s so tired. “The book died with him. So.” Tommy feels a lump in his throat. “So did Wil.”

Tubbo can’t think of a single thing to say.

“So. I’d like to say you don’t have to worry about me killing myself anymore, ‘cause before I was betting on Dream bringing me back, but honestly?” Tommy clutches fistfuls of grass. He can still hear crickets, he can see the first stars of the night, the grass is cool in his hands and it both soothes and makes his cut palms ache. He holds onto all of it, *is this worth living for? What about this? Or this? Is any of it?* “I don’t know,” Tommy whispers.

“I am... so sorry, Tommy,” Tubbo has nothing else to give.

Tommy doesn’t respond for a time. Then, voice soft and pleading and so grateful that Tubbo had come to him when asked. He can’t be alone. “Will you stay here with me? Just for a bit?”

Tubbo nods, pausing only for a moment to get out his comm.

**<Tubbo\_> I’ve got him. I’ll fill you in later. Can you tell the others it’s okay?**

**<Ranboo> Do you guys need me?**

**<Tubbo\_> I think we’re okay right now. But thanks**

Tubbo lays down beside him, trying to see whatever Tommy is fixated on.

“Y’know, it’s a little scary. Or not scary, but... weird,” Tommy reaches for Tubbo’s hand. Tubbo takes it.

“What, Tommy?”

Tommy is tired of feeling so small. “The night sky, I guess.” He thinks of Clara the Astronaut. Tommy doesn’t know how all those months ago he convinced himself he could invent enough compassion to survive. He still misses her, in a way.

“Guess that makes sense,” Tubbo says.

“Does it?”

“Yeah. From what you said about Limbo. Just... endless dark,” Tubbo doesn’t know if that’s something he should be bringing up, considering, but he’s noticed the more he tries to hold

back, the less honest he is with Tommy, the worse things get.

Tommy finally looks away, looking over at him in baffled confusion. It's something besides that hurt behind his eyes, so maybe it's an improvement. "Um. No."

"Oh?"

"No fucking way, Tubbo. You can't— You can't compare... *this* to Limbo. Even if there were clouds and shit, like, even if we didn't have the moon. Limbo was... infinite and *so* fucking claustrophobic. Nah. This is... This is something else," Tommy looks back up, overwhelmed by the sublime.

"So... what is it, then?" Tubbo isn't looking up. He's looking at his best friend's empty, exhausted expression. His eyes are wider than usual. Like he's let too much of the sky in and now he can't see anything else.

A pause, Tommy letting the grief settle in his chest. It doesn't get any less heavy, but it feels less like a wild animal clawing at the inside of his chest and more like a miserable old companion. Death means something again.

"...it's just big, isn't it?"

Tubbo looks back up. For the first time in a long time, he misses Wilbur. "Yeah. It is."

~

Tommy misses being dead.

He realizes that's what it is at some point. At first he thought he was just missing Wilbur, that that was the only cause of this strange, parallel manifestation of homesickness in his chest, but there are days when the room can never get dark enough and where no matter how long he spends curled in the dark, the very air touching his skin feels like too much. His own blood moving through his veins, his heart beating resolutely in his chest, the air always finding its way into his lungs, it's too much.

That longing— It isn't just for Wilbur.

He doesn't think he should be able to miss his Limbo. It had been hell, literally, eternally, hell. But in the same way Tommy had felt like he was leaving something behind when he'd left that cell for the last time, Tommy misses the quiet, the fact that no matter how bad it got, at least it was peace.

Tommy misses being dead and he misses when the world wasn't so big. The thought of ever being trapped like that again makes him want to stand on a mountain top and never get lower to the ground than that, but it's still strange.

Tommy and Tubbo spend more time in L'Manberg. Tubbo moves back into his old house, fixed up finally, and Tommy stays in his dirt home. Tommy sort of wishes he hadn't burned down Connor's house. He'd planned on restoring it to dirt, killing himself, and letting

Connor keep the wreckage. Connor hadn't taken it badly when Tommy told him he was moving back in, just a weary *whatever, man*, as he moved on to his next hideout.

They start talking about a funeral.

It isn't a matter of cruelty, or an attempt to force Tommy to move on, it's a matter of kindness, of closure.

"We should take him home, I think, Tommy. We can't bury him fully in L'Manberg because of the crater, but what about somewhere still on L'Manberg soil?" Tubbo offers.

"Yeah," Tommy says. "His— I— Wil's guitar," Tommy's voice shakes as he struggles to get the words out. He hasn't spoken much these last few days, more so drifted in a fog. "I saw it, had it, but I left it in Pogtopia. We need it."

"Okay. We can go get it," Ranboo nods.

"Have you found Ghostbur yet?" Tommy asks.

Tubbo and Ranboo exchanged a sympathetic look. "No, Tommy. I'm sorry. He hasn't turned up so far."

Tommy had been trying to find Ghostbur since Drista's visit. He wants to break the news to Wilbur. He doesn't even know if it'll work, but he thinks he owes his brother at least that. If only they could find the stupid conduit of a ghost.

"Okay," is all Tommy says. He can't bother insisting that they search harder or any pathetic attempts at a plan. It's all useless now.

"We don't have to keep talking about this tonight, Tommy," Tubbo says.

"Okay," Tommy shrugs. "I think I'm gonna go home."

"You sure you don't want to sleep here?" Tubbo asks.

Tommy hesitates. "Would you feel better? If I did?"

"Well, yeah," Tubbo says.

Tommy understands why. "Yeah, alright then. Guess I'll crash here," Tommy sighs.

Tommy misses being dead, but despite his uncertainties only a few nights ago, alongside the dawning grief and the relief of knowing he's finally, truly free, Tommy has realized he doesn't want to die. He misses being dead, but he misses being alive more.

He wants to make Wilbur proud. That's part of it, surely. But despite all of it, Tommy is still here, not for Wilbur, not for Tubbo, but simply because he can be. He chooses to push on in a world that at its kindest had remained indifferent to him. And god does that hurt.

"Good night, boys," Tommy sighs, falling onto his bed.

“Night, Tommy.”

Tommy doesn't sleep well. He hasn't for a long time, but he isn't up late with his mind buzzing with thoughts, restless and unceasing, he just isn't asleep either. His thoughts remain dampened behind a train station wall.

Tommy doesn't know what time it is when he gives up on sleep, puts on a coat and boots, and heads outside.

It's almost sunrise.

Tommy makes his way to the vault in the mountain side. He hasn't been here since he heard the news either. He wasn't sure what seeing Wilbur's body would do to him. While he can no longer take any solace in finding Wilbur's body intact, he still wants to talk to his brother somehow. Tommy descends the stairs, puts a new torch in a wall sconce, and turns.

Behind the sheet of glass, there is nothing.

~

As always, resurrection is not an easy thing.

After so much more time spent alone in his Limbo, Wilbur's first sense to return is neither sight nor sound, it's touch. The ground below him is cold, but he feels warm.

Wilbur can't remember the last time he felt warm.

## Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting to get to this moment for so long. SO long.

That exchange with Drista I had written since like. October.

Wanna know what changed for Drista? *Do you have any idea what it's like to lose your big brother? Twice?*

As always, Tommy loving things so devotedly that it reaches even the gods is what saves us in the end. Tommy loves his brother. Drista loves hers. So she brings Wil home.

I know it's another cliffhanger, but I hope it's a good one ;)



# Chapter 32

## Chapter Summary

“Everyone was pointing upward at the sky, which was turning into a symphony of color. First, orange streaks appeared in the blue, like an oboe joining a flute, turning a solo into a duet. That harmony built into a crescendo of colors as yellow and then pink added their voices to the chorus. The sky darkened, throwing the array of colors into even sharper relief. The word sunset couldn't possibly contain the meaning of the beauty above them, and for the millionth time since they'd landed, Wells found that the words they'd been taught to describe Earth paled in comparison to the real thing.”

— Kass Morgan, *The 100*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil isn't sure if he would call whatever this is grieving. He's never had to grieve for the same person three times. Phil can blame himself for the first death easily, the second death less so, and the third is not even a death, merely the lost potential of salvation.

What is there left to do, if he can't even regret not saving his son? There had been nothing *to* save. Not for a long time.

So Phil tries to keep busy. He spends time out in the arctic with Techno, helps him put together a beehive and a turtle farm, he spends as little time alone in his house in New L'Manberg as possible.

Techno's forte was not talking about feelings, and that suited Phil just fine. They could work, talk about nothing, and Phil could do his best not to think about Wilbur. Techno did try, in his own clumsy way. It was little things, asking Phil for help when he didn't need it, inviting him to dinner, finding tasks far away from the mainlands, so he and Phil can just walk, unbothered by anyone else. Techno wasn't treating him delicately, there were just times when he and Phil stood shoulder to shoulder, and Phil felt like there was just a little more of an offer of stability behind the gesture. Phil wouldn't have had it any other way.

“So, uh. Have you guys made any more... plans, then?” Techno asks awkwardly.

“Plans?”

“I mean, you guys were talkin' about a funeral the other day. So how are you... feeling about all that?” Techno doesn't look at Phil, just focuses on the long tunnel through the Netherrack they had cut.

“You don’t have to talk to me about this stuff, you know, Techno,” Phil says.

“Yeah, but I... thought I’d at least offer, y’know?” Techno shrugs. “So, how are you?”

Phil pauses, pickaxe swinging loosely at his side. “Not really anything new, is it?” He says with a tired laugh. “Wil has been dead for a long time. I... I know better than to get my hopes up on something like this.”

“Yeah, you *know* better, but easier said than done, right?” Techno says slowly. “Still sucks.”

“Yeah,” Phil is just so tired. “It does.”

“So...” Techno clearly seems to think there’s more to be said here.

Phil doesn’t know what he’s hoping for. “What about you, Techno? You sort of talked to Tommy the other day. He said he wasn’t mad at you, didn’t he? Was that enough closure for you?”

“...not really about me, is it?” Techno says dully.

Phil frowns. “You knew Wilbur too.”

Techno pauses, thinking back on Wilbur’s first, or rather third, death. He hadn’t prevented that. He’d all but encouraged his mania, and then when it came down to it, he brought hellfire after Wilbur had burned it down. It had been cruel. It had done nothing but worsen a wound. Later, he’d failed to save Tommy. Long after, he’d adamantly denied the possibility of resurrection, something that if it had been believed would’ve left Tommy to his fate, and even later they had been too late to get to Wilbur alive. Techno remembers going over the hillside to the docks to find everyone else waiting for them. If he and Phil had gotten there just a bit sooner, maybe Wilbur would have survived. Maybe Techno would’ve gotten the chance to reconcile with a friend he had, as far as Techno was concerned, had aided and abetted in a suicide.

“Yeah. I did. But it’s not like we’re waiting on an opportunity for closure from him. This is the part where we... we make peace with what we have and we ask each other *are you okay*,” Techno looks Phil in the eye, calm, resolute, deliberate. “So, are you okay?”

Phil nods but in the same moment he crumbles. “I, uh,” Phil laughs, holding back a sob. “I miss my kid, Techno. It’s been... it’s been months, but it sure as fuck hasn’t been long enough, especially not with...” Phil sniffs, gesturing vaguely to the air. “All this shit going on.” A shaky exhale. “Dunno what you want me to say,” another weak laugh. “My son is dead. And I’m the one who killed him first. So— What am I meant to do, huh? Feel *relieved* that him being dead right now— That’s not on *me* anymore, is it?” Phil almost sounds accusing now, but this resentment, it’s not directed at Techno. “How the fuck is that fair? How come *I* get a free pass on killing Wil? Right now I get to say— He isn’t dead because of me! And it’s not fucking *fair*, Techno. It’s not. So, when do I get to the part where I accept that, huh?” He stares at Techno, determined and bitter, daring him to give a reply.

“This... probably isn’t what you wanna hear, but I think the acceptin’ it stuff, it’s up to you,” Techno shrugs.

“Right,” Phil sighs. “You’d think we’d be used to outliving people by now, huh?”

“You know, sometimes I kinda think we have. You aren’t hurt because you’re surprised, are you? Or that he’s dead, not really. It’s because of the way he went. Both times. We’re used to people dying, Phil. I don’t think we can get used to them dyin’ on us wrong, y’know?” Techno isn’t good at gentle words, but there’s still something about it. Something he and Phil alone understand, and sharing that between them, that’s kind.

Phil nods. “Thanks for being here, Techno.”

Techno grows sheepish. “Come on, I dragged you out here to go mining, don’t go thankin’ me.”

“Then, you’re welcome,” Phil smiles.

Techno offers some respite, but eventually he has to return home, to the crater his son had left this world with, the crater he had left *him* with as well. Time spent in New L’Manberg is often punctuated by the presence of a ghost. Not for days now, not since Tommy had told him that what little hope he’d had had died with a monster. Still, he doesn’t mind being alone. He’d spent years on his own, often preferred it that way to living amidst a bustling society, not that New L’Manberg could be called anything as such. It’s the quiet, the stagnation, that lets the grief settle on his chest like a tumor.

The sleeplessness too.

Phil has always been an early riser, but he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t already been laying awake until the outside world turned from black to blue.

Phil hadn’t seen his son in months the day he killed him. Then their only in-person conversation had been frantic and then deadly. Lurking in the background of his mind constantly is the cruel question of what he could have done differently, despite them being so far past second chances. Resurrection is real, but not for him. Not for Wilbur. How could he think he’d ever get that lucky? That he could get redeemed for killing his son?

*He’d begged you to.*

*Yeah, but I never should have listened.*

Phil thinks about Wil more often than not. That must be why he mistakes the figure lying down on the cliffside for his son.

“The fuck—?” Phil rushes to his front door, because the illusion doesn’t break, no logical answer emerges, and he’s left staring at his son, in that same stupid bloody coat of his, laid out on the cliffside. It can’t be. They’d lost their last chance, their last hope. There’s nothing left to save him. “Wil?!” Phil is running toward the cliffs, scrambling over the hill. The last time he had done this, he’d found his son’s corpse. He shouldn’t throw himself into

this hope with reckless abandon. Phil can't imagine any other way; living or dead, all he can do is make sure his son isn't alone. Phil falls to his knees beside the body, shaking as he reaches out to him. "Wil- I'm here, I'm here, it's your dad- Can you hear me?" Phil holds Wilbur's face in his hands, he's so pale, but he isn't cold, but Wilbur isn't moving. *He isn't fucking moving-* "Oh god, Wil- Please, please answer, you've got to answer me right now. I- It's your dad, Wil. I'm here, so just please fucking answer me, mate. Come back to me, please--"

"Oh, hey Phil..." Wilbur says weakly, brown eyes murkied with grey open slowly and stare up at him blearily.

And Phil laughs. Because of course, his son, full of melodrama since the day he was born, comes back from the impossible dead just after all hope was lost with a casual *oh, hey Phil* and a shaky smile. "Jesus fucking Christ- You're with me? You're *actually* with me?" Phil supports Wilbur's head, helping him pull away from the stone, holding him in a manner so different to carrying a limp corpse out of a cell. He lets Wilbur remain sluggish, laying against him. Phil wants to pull him into a hug, to hold on and never let go, but he doesn't know how fragile his son might be fresh from the dead, and if Wilbur just needs someone to lean on right now, he's not going anywhere.

"I am... fairly sure," Wilbur balls his hands into fists before letting them go slack a few times, new tendons and nerves relighting as life returns. It's not exactly painless, but every bit of hurt feels like a relief, it's feeling that lingers instead of fading into Limbo's obscurity. Instead, the pain exists within himself, tangible and real, and the world spreads out around him, air that moves and words that don't echo. Wilbur stares up at a purple sky and his eyes shine. "I'm... I'm here," he says breathlessly, too occupied taking in the living, breathing world around him. It's almost unbearable. The air in his lungs, the feeling of the stone beneath him, his heart beating in his chest, the scent of grass, the breeze, and the *sun-*

Looking up, Wilbur lets it consume him. It is nothing like bombs or burning, nothing like a sky on fire. Wilbur's eyes wander to the horizon, to the dawn slowly easing the world into another day as it had for every day before with or without him, to the vibrant hues of yellow and orange melting into the blue. The colors.

Wilbur had forgotten.

~

"Tubbo!" Tommy scrambles back toward the house, frantic. "Tubbo, wake up, it's Wil- He's gone- He isn't- Fuck, Tubbo, something is wrong, it has to be, I dunno--"

"Whas goin' on?" Tubbo sits up sluggishly, struggling to get his bearings, reaching for his axe immediately.

"Wil is *gone*, Tubbo. H-He's not- He's not in the vault," Tommy can't stop himself from grabbing Tubbo by the shoulders. "W-We were gonna bury him, he can't- Who would've taken him- what the *fuck-*"

"Tommy, take a deep breath, slow down," Tubbo struggles to follow Tommy's rambling.

“What if he’s back?” Tommy holds onto Tubbo’s shoulders, speaking more steadily, no less terrified. “W-What if Dream came back somehow, and now he’s got Wilbur, and he’s hurting him?”

Tubbo feels sick. He buries it, doesn’t allow his hands to shake, he holds onto his axe a little tighter. “XD took him. He wouldn’t– Why would he bring him back?”

“B-Because Dream is a conniving fucking bastard who might’ve– maybe he convinced him o-or made a deal, eh?” Tommy is falling deeper into this spiral, all the more certain of it. Wilbur is gone. Dream is hurting him. Tommy didn’t just lose his big brother again, he failed to save him from Dream.

“Okay, okay, Tommy. If it was Dream, wouldn’t he have left a note or a... a threat?” Tubbo offers.

“I *don’t know*,” Tommy’s voice is high and shaky. “I don’t know, Tubbo, but if he’s– if he has him– oh *fuck* how could I have let this happen?!”

Tubbo tries to focus, to not get dragged into Tommy’s panic. Even if Tommy is right, Tubbo will take care of it. He’ll kill Dream again, whatever it takes. “Let’s be logical about this. I will– I’m gonna message Phil. To see if maybe he moved him. We were talking about funeral plans the other day– and Ranboo! Ranboo too. He might have... He might’ve done it,” Tubbo tries.

“Right, right, they might’ve just... yeah,” Tommy nods quickly, but they both know no one in their right mind would move the body without telling them.

**<Tubbo\_> something happened to Wilbur. Hes not in the vault anymore**

**<Ranboo> what?**

**<Tubbo\_> Phil? Any ideas? Tommy is freaking out**

**<Ranboo> one sec im at home I can go wake him up**

**<Ranboo> get to L’Manberg now.**

**<Ranboo> It’s good! It’s really good. But you’re going to want to get here**

“Ranboo says... he says to meet him in L’Manberg,” Tubbo stares down at his comm, like the words will somehow change if he blinks. “He says it’s... he says it’s for something *good*.”

He and Tommy are thinking the same, terrible, agonizing, *hopeful* thought. The last time this happened, a body missing and seemingly stolen, Tommy came back.

“Something good?” Tommy says hoarsely. It can’t be. He would never get this lucky. Tommy doesn’t *win* at things, he survives them, and he definitely doesn’t get rewarded. He doesn’t get what he deserves.

For the first time in a long time, when Tommy runs to L’Manberg, he’s running home.

~

“Wait—” Wilbur fights to sit up on his own. This is the first time he’s been outside in years, but even this momentary bliss must be set aside. “Where is he?”

“What’s that, mate?” Phil can only fixate on his son, alive and real in front of him, no one else matters.

“Where’s Dream?”

“What?” Now Phil refocuses, worry taking over. Of all the things he’d expected from Wilbur in his first moments back, it hadn’t been that. “Dream?”

“If I’m back— That means he’s around. He’s gonna go after Tommy— Is Tommy safe?” Wilbur is urgent, holding onto Phil’s jacket with an iron grip. “We need to find them, Phil, he can’t get to Tommy again— he can’t. Where the fuck is Tommy?!”

“He’s with Tubbo, I think,” Phil says slowly. “But... Wil, Dream is gone.”

“He’s— What?” Wilbur stares at him, torn between relief and dread. “Then... how am I...”

“DreamXD took him somewhere, Tommy said. Drista told him. I don’t... I really don’t know how, but you’re here, okay? Try to focus on that. We’ll get Tommy,” Phil turns back toward L’Manberg, but keeps one hand on his son’s shoulder.

Ranboo stares back with wide eyes. “Is that..?”

Phil beams. “Ranboo, meet Wil.”

Wilbur squints at the towering Enderman hybrid. “Ayup?”

“Uhh ...hi.”

“I remember I saw you,” Wilbur nods. “You helped Tommy. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome?” Ranboo tries to shake off his shock, “one sec, Tommy and Tubbo are freaking out because... well, because your body is gone.”

“Where are they?” Wilbur struggles to stand, holding onto Phil’s arm for support.

“I’ll get them here,” Ranboo types something out on his comm. “I don’t... really know how to explain this one. But they’ll see you soon enough, huh?”

*They’ll see you soon enough.* Words too simple for what they mean after so much time alone.

“I’m gonna... I’m gonna see Tommy,” Wilbur stares at Ranboo like somehow the answer will change, like some terrible problem will replace those words and Wilbur will find himself dead and useless again.

Ranboo smiles at him in a way which makes Wilbur immediately grateful that Tommy had had a friend like him. “Yeah. You are.”

~

Tommy stares ahead, almost running along the prime path even as every step is a struggle, Tubbo keeping pace easily.

*You won't see him. You're gonna turn the corner, and he won't be there. He won't be there alive at least. You'd never get that lucky.*

Tommy stumbles through the tunnel in the mountain, past his house, toward the sunrise.

*You don't know what Ranboo saw. He just said it was something good. Good doesn't mean the universe is kind. Good doesn't mean your dead brother comes back.*

He emerges, scanning the L'Manberg skyline.

On the cliffside. Brown coat, a white streak in his curly hair, pale as death, but *alive*.

“WIL!” Tommy screams his name like his life depends on it.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur is like a fawn on new legs, stumbling down the hillside toward his brother.

“How are you— What did— You're—” before Tommy can find the words, Wilbur nearly sends them both to the ground. Wilbur can't comprehend the relief of holding his brother after so much time untethered.

No more only holding each other when they're dead, no more unfinished symphonies, no more questions of what they deserve. Finally, Tommy can hug his brother.

“I love you,” Tommy clings to him like if he lets go he'll disappear. “You're my brother and I love you.” Finally, he gets to say it back.

“You've been waiting to say that, have you?” Wilbur mumbles.

“Fuck off,” Tommy hasn't felt like this in a long time. He can't describe it, finally something beyond contentment or peace. Tommy had scraped together some approximation of happiness these past months, but Tommy hasn't felt this *right* since he came back. This won't fix everything, but Tommy doesn't care what else is left broken as long as he has Wilbur by his side.

Tommy finally pulls away, halfheartedly punching Wilbur in the chest. “And don't you fucking *ever* do that to me again!”

“What?” Wil laughs, sent stumbling back by barely a blow.

“All that shit in Limbo, dickhead! Just *tell* me next time. You didn't help shit by talking around it,” Tommy is having trouble actually being mad at Wilbur.

“I can’t believe you,” Wilbur looks delighted by the mere sight of him. “All these years I’m gone, I’m back ten minutes and you’re already shouting at me.”

*All these years I’m gone.* That brings Tommy back to reality, tears more guilt than joy returning to him, “I am– I’m so sorry, Wil. I am so fucking sorry, man, I tried, I tried to get you back, I tried everything I couldn’t do it I didn’t know how a-and I didn’t mean to give up on you but after Dream disappeared I didn’t think I would be able to find a way I’m sorry we were gonna bury you– I gave up on you, but I didn’t want to, I *swear* I didn’t– we were gonna fucking *bury you*, but I didn’t know what else to do– I’m so fucking sorry, Wil, I just didn’t know what else to–”

Wilbur silences him with another hug, Tommy grabbing onto fistfuls of the back of Wil’s jacket, burying his face in his shoulder, breathing in the scent of cigarettes and musty, bloodstained fabric and just *Wil*.

Wilbur rests his head on top of Tommy’s, rubbing his back as he had a hundred times before, as Tommy holds onto him so tightly it almost hurts. “Don’t do that.” Wilbur has been alone for so long, there’s no room in that solitude left for anger, least of all for Tommy. “Don’t you do that for me. You know I never blamed you. Not once,” he murmurs.

“I talked to you, you know,” Tommy mumbles. “To Ghostbur, I tried to talk to you. I didn’t want you to think you were alone.”

“I know you did.” That had been its own wound, glimpses of Tommy trying so hard to save him, unable to reach back and tell him to move on. So many years spent alone, those glimpses of Tommy less than a moment in all of that time, but it had been a tether, keeping him connected to the world, a single thread out of the dark and into the light. Finally, Wilbur is out of that train station. This time he did not open his eyes from one cage to another. Wilbur gets to see the sun again. “I’m alive,” Wilbur’s voice thick with emotion, euphoria, shock, maybe grief for the time and sanity which he cannot even call stolen when he chose to leave first, he clings to all of it. He hasn’t felt this much of anything in so many years.

Tommy can hear Wil’s heart, beating just a bit too fast in his chest. He lets its rhythm sink into him, a second pulse beside his own.

The sun keeps rising.

## Chapter End Notes

this one is shorter than my other updates, but I didn't want to keep you guys waiting any longer! I promised you all a happy ending, and how can there be a happy ending without Wilbur and Tommy safe together? <3

There will be a few more chapters to this fic, I'll give you all some more warning when we approach the end, but we're in the endgame now.



Hope this gives you all some joy. Finally, right? :D

# Chapter 33

## Chapter Notes

CW: referenced suicide

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur lets go first, mostly because he can't believe what he's seeing. Tommy lets him pull away. He understands the raw astonishment in his eyes all too well. "Holy shit– *Tubbo?* It's been a long time, man!" He laughs, stepping forward like he's going to hug him before pausing, unsure of what is welcome.

Tubbo considers not meeting him halfway. He'd spent most of his presidency with this biting and strangled resentment that all of this was Wilbur's fault, he'd placed all of his pains on a dead man's shoulders because he'd never asked for this. He'd hated Wilbur as much as he'd wanted him back. That isn't something Tubbo is inclined to let go of easily. But then he heard how much Tommy needed him. That Wilbur is why Tommy got out alive instead of dead, that he's why Tommy came home at all. He had been his anchor when untethered in a void, he had offered the only promise of a light at the end of the tunnel, fighting tooth and nail not to break it as he had so many others. He had been there for Tommy when Tubbo hadn't. Tubbo puts away his axe and pulls their old leader into a hug. He's careful. Wilbur seems fragile.

"You're... you're okay," Wilbur murmurs. He sounds surprised.

Tubbo pulls back, not upset, but he needs to draw a line. This vulnerability was enough, he replies more jokingly, "well, I'd say that's relative, but sure."

Wilbur smiles. "I'm glad." He stares at Tubbo, taking in his scarred face. It has been far more years since he'd seen Tubbo than Tommy. Although, he supposes, that's not the case for them. Tubbo still has the boyish features of someone who never should've been asked to lead. Wilbur seems to blink awake, not even returning from the dead can bury his fears. He turns to Tommy sharply. "Wait, wait, Tommy– If I'm here, then Dream can't be far, we need to– to get people, I dunno, to do something!"

"No, no Wilbur, it's okay, Dream is gone. Drista told me XD took him away and I... I trust her," Tommy almost surprises himself with how certain he feels. "He's gone," Tommy has known for a while now, but looking at Wilbur as he says it is another thing entirely. "And you're here."

Wilbur beams at him, almost giddy. "I'm fucking *here!* I'm back!" He stumbles back, spreading his arms and gesturing broadly to a world very much alive around him, he staggers off the prime path, off balance and unsteady and overwhelmed. He hits the ground, splayed

out in the grass. Before anyone can even think about asking him if he's okay, he's giggling. "It's not tile... it's not even fucking concrete!" He buries his face in his hands, shoulders shaking.

"Wil?" Tommy doesn't know what to do. He has no idea how the rest of them had coped with him on his return.

Wilbur can't tell if he's laughing or crying either. "I'm alive!"

A pause, not another word spoken in reply, Tubbo, Ranboo, Phil, and Tommy all staring at Wilbur, who remains fixated on the sky.

Wilbur calms, lowering his hands from his face, still smiling uncontrollably up at the sky. Speaking to both no one and everyone, voice softer now, he breaks the silence. "What do I... what do I do now?"

And still, no one has a reply.

Answers for how Wilbur had returned are given. In the sky above Tommy's house is something that hadn't been there when he and Tubbo had ran to L'Manberg. In giant, flaming letters:

*UR WELCOME*

Drista hadn't signed the message, but she might as well have.

The first days are euphoric. Wilbur taking in the world with bumbling enthusiasm that Tommy cannot help but envy. Tommy's first months back were drenched in fear and paranoia. He barely went outside and he spent every moment waiting for it all to be taken away. He knows Wilbur has suffered so much up until this point, that *envy* should be the last thing on his list when it comes to him, but he can't help it.

Wilbur is *happy*.

Tommy wants to follow that so badly it hurts. And sometimes he does, but it feels like trying to keep up with someone in a hurricane. He loses track so easily now.

They don't talk about it. It's been over a week and neither of them have brought it up, not Dream, not Limbo. They talk about the grass and what it's like to feel warm, about hunger and how abundant sweetness hurts their teeth. They complain about bright lights and Tommy helps Wilbur try to figure out what all has changed on the server when he's hardly grasped it himself.

It's nice. Peaceful. They've both earned some peace. But Tommy also realizes that it doesn't fix things. That's a hard thing for him to reckon with, but he knows he can't have expected more than this. Wilbur being alive again doesn't magically fix him, it doesn't undo the damage that remains. It doesn't feel fair. Tommy got everything he wanted, Dream gone and his brother home, and he still doesn't feel like himself.

Wilbur seemingly assumes Tommy has already been through this experience, where all he could do is consume existence, revel in all of it until he felt half mad. He talks about it that way.

*“Holy shit I forgot what burns felt like! Tommy look– I burned my hand on Phil’s stove, look!”*

*“Tommy, Tommy look, there’s an ant on my ankle. Look at him! Trucking along– I can feel his little legs!”*

*“Tommy, did you see the clouds earlier? You could see them moving it was so windy outside!”*

*“Tommy, I don’t know how to slow down! I dunno how you managed it all. I feel tired but I don’t want to go to sleep, but sleep is so good when it’s real. Are you tired, Tommy?”*

He doesn’t know Tommy never had this part. He couldn’t really sink his teeth into life when he spent every moment waiting for it to be stolen from him. Wilbur doesn’t know this, of course. Because despite the weeks together, they don’t *really* talk to each other, both too scared of hurting the other.

Wilbur doesn’t bring it up, but Limbo hasn’t left him alone since he’s come back. Wilbur is trying so hard to soak in the reality of being alive, to feel things and know that he’s there. The taste of bread, the wind, every breath feels unnatural, terrifying and exhilarating. Even with Tommy as his primary company, he still feels like he’s trying to catch up on what he’s lost and like he’s falling behind. Even without that feeling, his efforts don’t mean very much. Mere weeks, mere months, don’t make a fucking *dent* in Limbo.

Wilbur lost count.

If asked, he’d probably say he was in limbo fifteen years, but the truth of the matter is he lost track. He isn’t even sure *how* he kept track in Limbo, some deep rooted internal clock that told him, *that’s another hour, that’s another day, that’s another month, and that’s another year*; until it didn’t. Until there was no time or feeling or knowing himself as anything other than a shell. Wilbur had on occasion glimpsed through Ghostbur’s eyes, but those moments felt like a fever dream, tiny pieces of the world and a dark library and once every few years, Tommy. Wilbur wouldn’t tell Tommy this, well, he hasn’t told Tommy anything, really, but Wilbur had spent the past however many years since he lost track laying on the floor, not moving, staring at the ceiling until the shape of the tile, the fluorescent lights, it burned into his eyes. He never had to blink, but in those rare moments where he looked away or focused on something else, he’d realize the lights and the shapes stay, the slightest change in color or light marked out in his eyes, like a strange, foggy map. *Years* unmoving until he felt his very soul fizzle out. He stopped having thoughts, there was just an empty, broken mind and the ceiling above.

Even now, looking through literally new eyes, when he shuts them he sees the lines from the tile like a scar inside his mind. Sometimes when he stares off into space, glazed over looking at grass or a tree or L’Manberg– *New L’Manberg*, it’s *new*– the lines of the tile ceiling begin to appear and snap him out of it. He’s scared if he falls in too deep, the living world will fade out and the tile ceiling will become his reality. Sometimes Wilbur just wants to scream about

his losses, to tell Tommy every cold detail, to sob until his lungs give out, but he never does. He sees that look in Tommy's eyes and knows it's something he can't quite understand. He knows enough that Tommy doesn't deserve to feel hurt about something else.

So Wilbur tries to drown himself in the relief of it, the joy. He doesn't *lie* to Tommy, not really, he just keeps his breakdowns close to his chest. Like he had in the L'Manberg days, just before the election...

He doesn't lie, but he tries to ignore Limbo clinging to him like a second skin and he jokes with Tommy and marvels at every tree, every animal, every sunny day. Sometimes it works and Wilbur believes that he's alive again.

It's raining. The first rain Wilbur has seen in this life. He sits outside until he goes numb with cold. It's a storm, the sheets of rain making it impossible to see, but Wilbur just closes his eyes, and the cracked pattern of the train station walls don't matter when he can feel the water beating against his skin. He hears the rain, a constant hum in his ears, his legs swing off the edge of a New L'Manberg platform and he hears the drops hit the water below. His cracked glasses steam up and the water trails down his face and he almost inhales it, coughing and laughing at the taste of rainwater. He takes a deep breath, the scent of petrichor heady and foreign in the air.

*You're alive. The rest of it doesn't matter. You didn't lose twenty or whatever fucking years because you're back. Pulled out of time so you've only lost a year. That's good. You should be happy.*

*Why aren't you happy?*

Wilbur clings to the edge of the wet oak planks, holding on for dear life like he might fall in. The water makes his clothes heavier. They weigh him down. That's a new one. Wet clothes, feeling heavy, a weight on top of him, he hadn't remembered what that felt like. He needs a cigarette, but if he smokes he'll have to get out of the rain. He doesn't move.

He doesn't understand how Tommy does it. He's so *transparent*. He has bad days and he doesn't try and bury that fog behind his eyes. He goes to Tubbo and Ranboo for help. He tells them how scared he is. Tommy is honest in a way Wilbur doesn't think he ever could be. Wilbur gets scared, he gets fucking *terrified* that all of this is a dream he'll soon wake from back in that train station, and he buries it, he smiles too wide and he strolls down the prime path and comments on all the new buildings he hadn't ever seen before. He tries to stay grounded, to remind himself that the dead don't dream.

He focuses on the rain. He lets the water soak in, his fingers numb, and he only thinks about the sound of the rain. He ends up shivering violently, teeth chattering, but he embraces that pain too, only going inside when Phil begs him to.

"Wil! Jesus Christ— Get back in here you're gonna burn— I mean— You're gonna get sick!" Phil calls to him from the overhang over his front door.

Wilbur hesitates only for a moment, and then he thinks of tea and warm, dry clothes and a fire and Phil beside him. He thinks of sitting up on Phil's balcony with a cigarette. He gets

up.

“Fine, fine, I’m coming,” Wilbur rolls his eyes, wiping the water from his glasses and carefully getting to his feet. He pauses only for another moment, looking down at the water filling the crater. It’s normally rather still, but now it is hundreds of overlapping ripples as the rain stirs its surface. Wilbur returns to Phil’s house flushed and content. Since his return, outside of the general euphoria of being alive again, Wilbur feels resolutely *calmer*. It’s like his anger stayed dead. At least compared to the mania, the blame, the fury that had festered in Limbo. Still, it’s like his head is just a more peaceful place to be. He can just watch the rain. The first time he’d stepped out into the rain, he’d expected it to sting. He has a feeling it’s for the same reason he’s found this calm inside of him.

“You’re fucking freezing, mate, go put on some dry clothes. I’ll put the kettle on,” Phil presses the back of his hand to Wilbur’s forehead as he had done so many times before. “There’s clean towels downstairs in the bath.”

Technically, Wilbur has a home.

The replica of the Camarvan sits beside the lake and Wilbur had— with Phil and Techno’s help— dragged a bed inside. There’s little more to it than that. Wilbur spends more time at Phil’s place, or Tommy’s, or Tubbo’s if Tommy is there. He’d been out to Technoblade’s place once, but he hadn’t looked around much, instead occupied explaining to a shocked and nonetheless relieved Technoblade.

Wilbur returns in an old sweater Eret had given him along with the rest of his old things. Eret had been keeping them in a museum. Wilbur had found that funny. Eret had laughed along, but even through the shades, Wilbur could recognize that look they gave him. An apology they’re afraid to say aloud. Wilbur understood. He hopes they know that, and maybe one day they’ll talk. Not yet.

“Where’s Tommy?” Wilbur dries his curls with a towel before settling in at Phil’s kitchen table.

“I don’t know. Haven’t seen him yet today.”

Wilbur pats his pockets which are, of course, empty. He frowns scanning the rest of the cluttered house. Phil grabs Wilbur’s comm from where he had last lost it in the shelves above the kitchen counters and put it down in front of him with a fond look.

“Oh, that’s where I— Thanks, Phil,” Wilbur smiles sheepishly. He keeps on losing the damn thing.

**<WilburSoot> Tommy?**

**<TommyInnit> safe**

Wilbur, relieved, sets the communicator aside, likely to be forgotten again. Tommy and Wilbur don’t spend every waking minute together, although sometimes it’s something close

to that, but at least a few times a day they go through those motions. First thing that morning it had been the same:

**<TommyInnit> Wilbur?**

**<WilburSoot> I'm safe.**

Back and forth like that. It helps. Even if they both know the threat is gone, it staves off the anxiety so they can actually be apart every once and a while. It's something like coping.

"How is he?" Phil asks, used to his son's new habits by now.

"Safe," is, as always, Wilbur's reply.

"And... are you doing alright?"

"Are you?"

Phil smiles at this. "You really haven't changed, have you? I'm good, mate. Your turn," he gives him a look.

"I am... doing pretty good today. The rain was nice," Wilbur shrugs.

"Yeah, I could tell," he laughs. "Here," he passes Wilbur a mug.

"Thanks, Phil."

Wilbur hasn't spoken with his father much either. Phil hasn't pushed, which he's grateful for, but it also means Wilbur has taken no steps to discuss with his dad the... unfortunate circumstances of their last meeting. It would be easy, surely. A little thing to alleviate the blame, *it wasn't your fault, dad. I was gonna do it either way. I'm sorry I put you in that situation. I'm not upset with you.*

But if he says that, it assumes that Phil feels responsible for what Wilbur, at least in his mind, did to himself. Maybe Phil always knew. Maybe Wilbur offering something almost like forgiveness would be an insult. Probably. The explosion was meant to take care of things. Phil was just an unlucky bystander who didn't stop Wilbur from falling on a sword. Maybe instead Phil is expecting an apology from Wilbur. Wilbur has seen his father's wings. He knows why they're like that.

So Wilbur doesn't say anything.

"So, are you going to Bad's party?" Phil asks.

Wilbur scrunches up his nose in distaste. "I'm not really feeling up to a *party*. I'm actually rather enjoying my social pariah status of late."

"Yeah, I'd expect not, I'd go, I just don't own anything red," Phil jokes.

Wilbur laughs, but now he's thinking about it. He has no idea why an invitation was even offered to him. Bad, for all his pretenses, didn't care much for courtesy when it didn't suit him. No one had reached out to talk to Wilbur, even though as far as he's aware the whole server was informed of his return and Dream's disappearance. Wilbur knows why no one has come to see him. They're all still a little scared of him. He's still just the guy that blew up a nation and killed himself. Wilbur glances at Phil. Well, *sort of* killed himself. Tried to at least.

"I'll... I'll be upstairs, if you need me," Wilbur gets up, rummaging through the pockets of his wet clothes until he finds what he's looking for.

"Okay, I'll be here," Phil hesitates, unsure of whether scolding his son for a coping mechanism is okay anymore.

Wilbur pretends not to notice, scaling the ladder with lanky limbs still unaccustomed to their own existence. He opens the door out onto Phil's balcony, staying half inside, just underneath the overhang. The pack of cigarettes had managed to stay dry tucked inside his coat. Wilbur resents himself a little bit, that his first moments alone back to life were spent searching for his old hideouts and chests for cigarettes. They help. They settle his nerves enough that his hands stop shaking and he no longer feels like he needs to scream. That's worth a little lung damage, surely.

One thing worth missing about Limbo is he didn't have to be ashamed of his habits. Not to say he took Tommy's previous fussing over his smoking to heart, but things change when he understands how desperately they want to keep him alive. Wilbur had only been able to smoke in Limbo after he knew Tommy was safe. Whatever the two of them had figured out together, if Wilbur put in the time he could have anything he wanted, really. Any *thing*. Nothing more. It got boring quickly.

Wil calms again. The rain dies down. He hears the ladder behind him creak.

"How are you feeling?" Phil asks again.

Wilbur's first instinct is to put the cigarette out and hide it from his dad, but he stops himself. Phil is more understanding than that, he knows that. "You already asked me that."

"I know," Phil leans against the wall across from him, looking out at the storm which has softened to a drizzle. "Tommy says his leg hurts more in bad weather. So I thought you might... I dunno."

"Oh," Wilbur blanks. "I don't... really have any old injuries like that."

Phil nods. "Good."

Silence.

Wilbur hadn't seen his dad in a long while before the 16th. He doesn't remember them ever being this stilted and awkward.



“And... what about you? Do your... do your wings hurt more in bad weather?” Wilbur can’t stop himself from staring at glossy black feathers just visible over Phil’s shoulder.

“What?” Phil seems surprised at first. He doesn’t seem to catch on to Wilbur’s intentions. “Oh. Oh, well, yeah. I suppose. Delicate bones and all that.”

Wilbur nods. Now he puts out the cigarette. He doesn’t know what to say.

*“I am so sorry.”*

*“I’m sorry for your wings because they’re my fault, aren’t they?”*

*“I’m sorry I did that to you. I’m sorry I put you in a position where you felt like you had no choice but to kill me. I was too much of a coward to finish the job myself.”*

*“You weren’t supposed to get hurt. You weren’t supposed to even be there.”*

*“Why did you grab me? Why did you get in the way if you were gonna break down and help me die anyway?”*

“Are you angry with me?” Wilbur says instead, his voice weak and fragile like a child holding back tears.

“I mean, not really, mate. I knew you smoked. I don’t *like* it, sure, and I wish you’d take it outside properly but I really don’t care, Wil,” Phil is gentle, but he’s still confused. He still doesn’t realize.

“Not... not about that,” Wilbur says with a bitter sort of smile. “I... *I did this to you,*” Wilbur says softly, almost a whisper, a shameful confession. “You’re never gonna be able to fly again, Phil, *you*.” He says it like it’s an impossibility. He couldn’t picture his father without his wings. “And that’s *my fucking fault*. And I am so sorry for it all but it’s not like me saying sorry gets you your wings back, now does it?”

Now Phil freezes, taken aback. For a moment Wilbur thinks he’s been proven right, as Phil frowns and seems to consider this carefully. “I’m not mad at you, Wil.”

Not the response Wilbur was expecting. Maybe the one he should be hoping for, but he doesn’t want it. Not if he doesn’t deserve it. “You should be,” Wilbur says coldly when Phil doesn’t elaborate. He doesn’t know what he deserves anymore.

“Well, that’s not really for you to decide, now is it?” Phil gives him a look. A pause. “Okay, maybe I was angry with you at one time, Wil. But it wasn’t about the wings. I would’ve sacrificed them and more if it meant you were going to live. But it didn’t.”

Wilbur almost flinches. “It wasn’t... Phil, it wasn’t you, you know. I would’ve... I would’ve found a way regardless.”

Phil feels an ache in his chest. “I know.” It’s exactly what Technoblade had told him.

“I know I shouldn’t have done that, pushed you like that, but know I wasn’t dead *because* of you. Not really,” Wilbur tries to offer some consolation.

“Is that right?” Phil says, unyielding. “I made a choice too, Wil. And that’s on me as much as it is you.”

Wilbur looks like he wants to argue. He falls back against the door frame with a huff. “Right... I don’t know why I’m being like this,” Wilbur stares gloomily out at the mist now gathering over the water under the platforms. “Didn’t really expect to get to this point... well, ever.”

Phil laughs under his breath. “Yeah, alright. Fair enough.”

“Why aren’t you?” Wilbur keeps pushing, he can’t help himself.

“What?”

“Why aren’t you angry with me?”

Phil shrugs. “I didn’t think you were coming back. And now you’re here. Why would I waste that time feeling angry with you, Wil? I’m... *I’m* sorry. I’m sorry that you needed help and you didn’t feel you could come to me with it. I’m sorry that I made you feel like you had to lie to me.”

“I didn’t want to worry you. Or-Or disappoint you—”

“I wouldn’t have cared if you disappointed me, Wil!” Phil bursts out. Finally, that cool collected shell cracks. “I wouldn’t have cared what you’d done! I would’ve— I would’ve helped you. Yeah, with the war like Techno, but I would’ve— I would’ve *helped* you.” Now Phil gets choked up, stepping back, holding a fist up to his mouth to cover something almost like a sob. “Damn the bloody wings— I don’t— I don’t *care*, Wil. You didn’t deserve— I should’ve— I’m sorry— I am so sorry, Wil. I should’ve got you out of there, I shouldn’t have— You were telling me to do it a-and you put the sword in my hands and you were telling me the rest of them were gonna kill you anyway and you wouldn’t stop *begging* and I didn’t know, I didn’t know how bad it had gotten, I didn’t know you couldn’t come back I didn’t know but you were still there and you didn’t disappear— Your body *stayed*, it fucking stayed and there was so much blood and I didn’t— I didn’t have time to hold you because the Withers were— oh *god*— I left you there after I—”

Wilbur throws his arms around Phil’s shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug, holding on like a promise to stay. “I’m here, dad. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. Promise.”

Phil hugs back, burying his face in Wilbur’s shoulder, finally mourning for the son he had lost.

~

<WilburSoot> Tommy?

<TommyInnit> safe

Tommy rereads the message on his comm. It's still so strange. When Ghostbur had vanished, the comm had stayed behind. It had been Wilbur's from the beginning. It had been strange to get messages from a dead man's comm, from a dead man's *ghost*, before all of this, and now knowing Wilbur is behind those words, eerie and comforting all at once. Still, it reminds him of other things he has to worry about.

"Wilbur?" Tubbo asks.

"Yeah, yeah he's just checking in," Tommy sets it aside.

"And... how is he?" Ranboo asks.

"Alright, I think," Tommy frowns, mulling it over. "What'd you suppose happened to Ghostbur?"

"What?" Tubbo stops his current task of reorganizing the chests that had long been abandoned in his old house. "Ghostbur?"

"Yeah," Tommy scuffs his feet on the floor. "What do you think happened to him? When Wil came back? Because... because before they traded places, so does that mean..." Tommy is getting quiet again, a worrying sign. "Is he stuck in limbo now?"

Ranboo and Tubbo exchange a worried look.

"I don't know, Tommy. I think the only thing you can do is... well, ask him," Ranboo offers.

"Thought you'd fuckin' say that," Tommy mutters.

"Why wouldn't you ask him, Tommy?" Tubbo asks.

Tommy debates this in his head. He knows why, but it feels like such a feeble thing. "Because me and Wilbur— We haven't *talked* about it. About Limbo. Or..." Tommy doesn't want to think about that man, he doesn't even want to say his fucking name. "...any of it."

"Why not?"

Tommy gives Tubbo a look. "Why do you fuckin' think? Not exactly easy, is it?"

Tubbo doesn't get annoyed, nodding. "Alright, fair point. I actually think you should, though."

"Why?" Tommy says gloomily. "Not gonna fuckin' change anything."

"Tommy," Tubbo sounds surprised with him. "I mean, who'd understand better than Wilbur, is what I'm saying."

"Who'd understand *better*?" Tommy repeats almost mockingly. "Yeah, you're right, no one. But that doesn't mean he really *gets it*, now, does it? Or that... or that I get him."

Ranboo hesitates, puzzled, before chiming in. “Well, if you were in Limbo together, and if he was there with... with Dream, then, wouldn’t he?” He asks tentatively.

Tommy has an answer, but he just shrugs.

He doesn’t know how to explain something like this. Tommy and Wilbur are the only ones who have any hope of understanding each other and are in the same breath incapable of it. For Wilbur, Dream was merely a blip in over a decade in limbo. For Tommy, limbo wasn’t by any means good, but still an escape from the torture of the waking world. Tommy almost misses limbo. Wilbur barely remembers his time with Dream. How do they communicate around that?

“Well, you can always try,” Tubbo interrupts his brooding.

“What?”

“Talking to Wilbur,” Tubbo says more intently. “You can... I mean, you can always try.”

~

“*You can always try,*” Tommy says mockingly to no one. “Stupid fuckin’ Tubbo always saying the right fuckin’ thing...” Tommy bangs on the door of the Camarvan. “Wil!” Tommy bellows through the door.

“What?!” Wilbur pulls the door open blearily. “Wot?!”

“It’s not even that late, man. You’re already asleep?” Tommy says teasingly, pushing past him into the Camarvan. “Think you might liven the place up a bit? Looks a bit shit right now.”

“Oh please, do come in,” Wilbur says sarcastically, stumbling into the back room with him.

“Fuckin’ dark in here too,” Tommy grabs the lantern on the table, lighting the oil.

“Fucking christ, Tommy—” Wilbur covers his eyes from the warm light, stumbling back before collapsing back onto his bed.

“It’s barely after sunset, man,” Tommy laughs.

“I’ve got... I’ve got a lot of sleep to catch up on,” Wilbur mumbles.

Tommy hesitates, more serious now. “...Do you want me to go?”

Wilbur is still dramatically covering his eyes with the back of his hand, but Tommy can still see his fond little smirk. “Finally, the two of us, we’ve got doors we can actually walk out of, but why the fuck would we use ‘em, right?”

Tommy huffs a laugh. “Yeah, I guess.”

Wilbur moves his hand, opening one eye to peer up at Tommy. Wilbur is more accustomed to Tommy's face than the rest of the living, but it still reminds Wilbur of how much and how little everything had changed. Tommy has only been back to freedom for a few months. Despite Wilbur's memories of far more years passing, Tommy is still seventeen, in the same breath Wilbur knows he still has the face of a washed up deadbeat inching towards thirty. He doesn't know why he'd expect any different. He can't imagine himself having a midlife crisis actually at midlife. He can't imagine himself at all, really. There hadn't been mirrors in Limbo. Tommy still just looks like his kid brother. A little more scars, sure, but still just Tommy, staring back at him with a serious frown and a furrowed brow.

"You alright there, Tommy? Why'd you stop by?"

This is the hard part. Tommy doesn't know where to begin. "Here's the thing. I was hoping you could— Alright," Tommy sighs. No point talking around it, he supposes. He's scared of what he'll find, but it's better than not knowing. "Tell me, Wil. What... what happened to Ghostbur?"

"Oh. Ghostbur," Wilbur doesn't sound upset, merely surprised, sitting up, more awake now.

"Is he... y'know?" Is how Tommy decides to nervously phrase it.

"He's not really *him*, you know."

Tommy stares at him, affronted. "What does that mean?"

"Ghostbur was just a bit of me that got left behind," Wilbur shrugs. "I dunno how I know, but I do." It's not merely the calm. Wilbur's morbid depression had faded with perhaps a bit too much speed. Not to say he isn't wildly depressed, but the honeymoon phase of returning to life hasn't died down yet. It almost feels like he's taking antidepressants. It doesn't cure him, but it treats him enough that he can get up and keep going. He tries to articulate it a way that will make some sort of sense. "It's not like I've got another me in me, but... it's like I don't feel as angry anymore. And it's easier to just... keep going. Easier than I thought it might've been, at least. And I think that must be him— or, me? I guess? I dunno, but patching me up."

Tommy still stares at him, mouth hanging open slightly, cogs turning behind his eyes as he tries to process this.

"You... you okay there, man?" Wilbur laughs nervously.

"Yeah, yeah I'm good," Tommy shakes his head like he's trying to get water out of his ears. "I just thought... I thought the two of you were so different."

Wilbur shrugged. "I don't know if I was really missing a part of myself in limbo. There wasn't really a place to remember how to care about shit and be excited and content or whatever when I was dead. Whatever I'd lost in him— I keep saying *him* but he's *me*— anyway. Whatever I'd lost in... that part of me," Wilbur stares down at the wooden planks, lost in thought, a soft smile returning. "I think I have it back."

Tommy feels that envy return. All he can think about is the parts of himself he never got back. “I’m happy for you, Wil.”

Wilbur stands, leaning against the table beside him, bumping his shoulder. “Couldn’t have done it without my right-hand man.”

“Oh fuck off,” Tommy rolls his eyes. “Don’t get sappy on me.”

“Aw, but you’re my little brother!” Wilbur coos. “My favorite grubby child!”

“I could kill you again, you know,” Tommy grumbles.

“I’d find a way back,” Wilbur shrugs.

“Would you?” Tommy’s whining fades into something more somber.

Wilbur looks back over at him, steady and certain. “Yeah. I would.”

It doesn’t matter if it’s a lie, because there will never come a time where they have to get Wilbur back. He’s home now, and he’s not going anywhere.

They still haven’t talked about it. About any of it. On nights like these, that quiet between them feels less like a burden and more so a mere presence. They have time to talk, so for now they’ll just sit beside each other in the Camarvan. As it should be.

## Chapter End Notes

C

Crimeboys :')

We inch closer to the end of all things, but not just yet! More crime awaits!

As always, feedback is cherished <3

# Chapter 34

## Chapter Notes

CW: discussion of suicide and abuse. the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur doesn't think he hates himself anymore. Nowhere near as badly as he did in the early days of Limbo, at least. Once Tommy had been saved, he'd spent years trying to forgive himself and maybe eventually he had. It doesn't help with any of the other pains of living, no matter how much he tries.

When Tommy isn't there, Wilbur wanders. He doesn't seek out anyone's company mostly because he forgets he can do that, instead he starts walking. And maybe it's just that sort of miserable day, but Wilbur finds himself in a ravine. He had stood at the top of a tight, spiraling staircase deep underground, had looked back over the forest behind him, and realized he had no idea how to get to L'Manberg from here. He should know this. He *should*.

But he doesn't. So instead, he heads underground. Even in the dark, he can see the shadows of the buttons on the floor. Still, he keeps going. Wilbur had never planned on coming back here. He hadn't planned on coming back *anywhere*, really, but especially not here. It's dark down here. Wilbur had, in theory, never been here when all the lanterns had gone dark, but maybe he had. Memories so much clearer since his return, soaked in guilt of a ghost returning here before he did. More than once. It's a split second in an eternity, but he feels that memory, the sight of Tommy kneeling over his guitar, and the pain of it makes him remember. Tommy hurting and alone and refusing to give up on him, he returned to this ravine too. It's strange. Ghostbur's memories feel like his own, but he *still* doesn't feel like he really *lived* them. He's changed since returning. He knows no one else can comprehend what it's like to have parts of himself suddenly returned, having spent a year wandering without him. They're all *him* now, *his* memories, but sometimes they still don't feel like his choices. To be fair, as Ghostbur he didn't *make* very many choices.

It's not a disconnect between himself in Limbo and himself as Ghostbur, it's just his head feels so *cluttered*. He gets confused so easily now, he doesn't know how to cope with how many people there are, how much room there is. Pogtopia is dark, the stone echoes differently than tile. Still, he doesn't like being underground.

Especially not here.

Wilbur returns to the last place he remembers. The alcove cut in the rock where he and Tommy had set up something of a bedroom. He remembers the guitar. It's still here. Wilbur's footsteps echoing are the only sound as he approaches it, looking down at it with a

weary frown. He'd managed to get a guitar in Limbo. After Tommy. He hadn't managed to play it. He'd held it, hands poised on the strings, and then nothing. He didn't put it down, he didn't even make an attempt. He just sat there, staring down at it, consumed by the thought of *what's the point?*

The guitar had spent the rest of the decade abandoned.

Wilbur picks up the guitar case. He heads out into the ravine. He stops. Wilbur stares up at the crisscrossing staircases and rickety pathways like a tangled web above him. There are too many shadows. It's like he can still see himself, wandering too close to the edge and rambling about his retribution.

*Tommy tried so hard. You remember. Even after all these years. You remember him begging you to stop, to just think, to remember the good you used to fight for. He tried everything. And you still failed him.*

Tommy, that reckless bundle of energy, running wild and finding trouble outside the walls of L'Manberg. Tommy, a hothead who pushed too far and fought a war to make up for it. Tommy, his anxious little brother asking him if he'd eaten yet and promising him that soon they would be able to go home.

Tommy has changed, undeniably he has, but he's the same boy who followed Wilbur until the end. A few more scars, eyes a little more grey than blue, and a white streak in his hair, but still Tommy.

Wilbur can't help but wonder if Tommy can still recognize him as the man who had started L'Manberg. He must look different. He *hopes* he looks different to the rambling madman he'd left to die down here, but he doesn't know.

Wilbur has seen maybe a glimpse of his own reflection in the weeks since being back. He's avoided it, and maybe he shouldn't, because when he tries to think of his own appearance now, it isn't the washed up, miserable, living man stumbling around the server, no. It's a dead body. It's his corpse in a pool of blood on the floor.

There are some things a person should never see, things a person should never be *able* to see in the first place, his own fucking dead body is definitely one of them. Particularly when it is the only time he has seen himself in over 15 years. His own face, pale and empty and expressionless, blood covering the side of his body, thrown away at the back of a cell, put in storage for later use by a monster, that is the only image of himself that remains. Maybe he should make an effort to remedy that. He doesn't know why he's so averse to his own reflection. He *doesn't* hate himself anymore, not like he did. That should be enough, surely.

*Why can't it be enough?*

Maybe if that were his only problem it would be okay, but of course it isn't. Wilbur gets lost now. He's not used to having so much space to wander and sometimes the size of the world makes his heart race. He's *foggy* now. He can't concentrate, every sound feels grating some days, he finds himself fading out, hours where he doesn't even think let alone feel. Maybe he should be grateful he remembers how to speak fucking English. All that time alone, the slim



amount of personhood he's retained should feel like a miracle. It doesn't feel very rewarding when he's still lost. In more ways than one.

As always, as it has always been since the earliest days of L'Manberg, Tommy finds him. Tommy brings him home.

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<WilburSoot> Tommy.

<TommyInnit> Wilbur?

<WilburSoot> Tommy what

<TommyInnit> u werent answering

<WilburSoot> sorry.

<TommyInnit> where ar u?

Wilbur types out *on my way back* before deleting it. He still doesn't know how to get back to L'Manberg— *New L'Manberg* from here. Fuck, he feels insane. Maybe those years really did age him and he's gone fucking senile.

<WilburSoot> Pogtopia.

<TommyInnit> Why???

<WilburSoot> found it.

<WilburSoot> can you come here?

<TommyInnit> WHY???

<WilburSoot> don't know how to get back.

<TommyInnit> AND YOU NEED MY HELP!!!

<WilburSoot> yes, Tommy.

<TommyInnit> ok wait htere

Wilbur exhales a soft laugh, sitting at the bottom of the stone staircase. He doesn't bother to light a lantern or put up a torch. He never had the dark in his Limbo. It's nice. Wilbur had forgotten what it was like to rest in the darkness. The shapes outlined in shadow are almost a comfort compared to the grim memories he has of a pitch black cell. He keeps his guitar close.

Tommy had spent the morning with Tubbo, under the impression that Wilbur would likely stick around New L'Manberg for the day. He wasn't there. That had incited a moment of panic, Tommy spamming Wilbur's comm until he got a reply.

*Pogtopia.*

Why the fuck is Wilbur in *Pogtopia*?

Tommy acts like that doesn't scare him, but it does. The thought of going to find *Wilbur* in *Pogtopia* is a special kind of dread. Although, hindsight changes things. It's harder to feel scared of that ravine knowing that there's worse out there. He had never been scared of Wilbur in Pogtopia, only scared *for* him. Maybe in another way, that's worse too.

Tommy doesn't tell anyone where he's going. It's strange that he doesn't have to anymore. No one is even worried about him hurting himself, although that may have to do with Tommy being scared of being dead and alone as much as it does with Wilbur being back. Tommy finds his old railway and starts walking. The physical therapy has helped dramatically, and while he *could* walk relatively well without the cane, he still uses it. It helps. Tommy is okay with making things easier for himself. That's something like progress, he'd like to think.

Wilbur had found his way to Pogtopia on a tightly wound spiral staircase. Tommy returns from a straight path right towards home.

"Wil?" Tommy's voice echoes into the dark as he turns the corner up into the main part of the ravine, one hand still on his cane, the other holding a torch, casting flickering shadows ahead.

"I'm here," Wilbur's voice replies from the dark.

"Fucking hell— coulda used a torch, you know," Tommy jumps, almost dropping it. He comes closer, putting the torch in a sconce along the wall, Wilbur wincing at the sudden return of light. Tommy had come here to walk Wilbur home. Wilbur doesn't get up to leave. He has his guitar. So Tommy flops down beside him, knocking shoulders. "You know there's a straight shot to L'Manberg from here, right? The railway I built. You turn and go right up there," he points.

"I... I forgot about that."

Tommy scoffs. "Of course you did."

"Thanks for coming out here. I didn't... I dunno," Wilbur says quietly.

"What would you do without me, right?" Tommy says teasingly.

Wilbur laughs, rolling his eyes. He still looks gloomy, almost *embarrassed*.

Tommy continues. "I got lost sometimes too. When I first got back."

"Did you?"

"Well, not as bad as you did, because I'm *me*, obviously. More like I'd just zone out and it took me... took me a bit longer to remember where I was, y'know?"

"Yeah. It's..." Wilbur searches for the right word for wandering in a daze. "Confusing."

Tommy hums something like an agreeing response. Mostly he just stares ahead, the darkness of the ravine makes him a little more uneasy than it does for Wilbur. He glances back to his right, looking down at the guitar case between them.

"You found it."

"What? Oh. Yeah, I did," Wilbur stares down at the case like he doesn't know what to do with it. He still hasn't opened it.

Tommy doesn't know why he's longing for his brother when he's sitting right beside him. He wants to ask:

*Play it. Play something. Come on, anything, man. Just like old times. Please. I miss it.*

*I miss you, Wil.*

He doesn't say anything.

"It's been... it's been a long time," Wilbur murmurs.

"You... you never played it? In Limbo? When we... when we tried to make it nice for Ghostbur, you got it, ay?" Tommy asks, he knows he sounds desperate.

"Yeah I had a guitar. But... I didn't. I didn't play it." Wilbur looks away from the guitar case. He doesn't open it. "I didn't play it."

Tommy tries to read his expression through the dark. Tommy still hasn't quite relearned how to read faces, he only knows to look at their hands, to make sure they don't have a weapon. Not exactly useful in trying to gauge his brother's emotional state. "Why not?"

Wilbur shrugs. "Bit harder without an audience."

It's a simple answer for all the cruelty it holds.

"Right."

Wilbur doesn't continue the conversation, so Tommy doesn't either. Sitting in silence together is both familiar and unnatural. Tommy wants to spend as much time with Wilbur as he can, he does, but these times feel strange to him now. In Limbo, doing nothing together

was literally their only option. In the living world, it's like they don't know any better. Sure, they walk around the server and talk about how much has changed, but they don't always do that.

Sometimes they end up finding somewhere in shadow, in Tommy's house, the Camarvan, the many abandoned structures littering the server, anything away from the harsh light of the sun, the noise of a living world, and then they do nothing at all. It's never their plan, but it happens anyway. Today, it just so happens to be Pogtopia.

It's a familiar ritual by now. Not a word spoken between them, sitting in silence, sometimes beside each other, sometimes not, and letting their minds wander. Maybe it should be comforting, to be able to sit without feeling the need to act, but it is a product of purgatory, not ease. The two of them can sit still for hours, only remembering they're alive when they begin to feel sore or hungry. It's moments like this where they both can't help but wonder if maybe they're just not *good* for each other anymore.

It can't be that. They just get stuck sometimes. Tommy would've gotten stuck anyway, surely. It's just... having someone who spirals in the same way can turn a bad day for one of them into a bad day for both. Days where the stillness becomes everything again and it's hard to feel alive.

They cannot tell that time has passed in Pogtopia. They had known that timelessness long ago, Tommy fighting it, spending as much time outside as he could, and Wilbur brooding in it. It returns to them, a new sort of damage different to the one back in the war days. Tommy might've stayed there forever if Tubbo hadn't reached out to him.

**<Tubbo> you coming over for dinner bossman?**

**<TommyInnit> shit**

**<TommyInnit> forgot. Ill be there soon. Can Wilbur come?**

**<Tubbo> yeah!**

Tommy stands with weary sigh, knees aching. "Come on, then, Wil. We've got places to be."

"We do?" Wilbur blinks, as if waking from a dream.

"Yeah. President Tubbo has summoned us," Tommy offers him a hand off the ground. Wilbur accepts. "And don't— don't forget that," he nods to the guitar.

"Yeah, yeah right," Wilbur shakes his head, an effort to clear it, before grabbing the case off the ground.

"You alright?" Tommy asks.

"What? Yeah. Yeah, fine," Wilbur smiles in a way Tommy finds familiar. The same way he smiled in the election days, strained. Tommy should ask him about it. He stays silent.

They return back to the light.

“You doing alright with that?” Wilbur swings the guitar case at his side, nodding to Tommy’s cane.

“Eh?” Tommy glances down, puzzled. “The fuck d’you mean?”

“When’s it gonna heal? You’re not on crutches. That’s something, right?” Wilbur asks. It’s like he’s searching for common ground, like he felt the same lull, the same weighted silence Tommy had.

Tommy looks down at the cobblestone beneath him, each step with his left leg accompanied by the clunk of wood against stone. “Some things don’t heal, Wil. I’m fine as is.”

“Oh,” Wilbur seems to struggle with how to respond to that. “I’m... I’m glad you’re okay with it, then.”

There they go again. Tiptoeing around the real questions, accepting dull, empty answers with nothing to show for it.

“Would you talk about it? About Limbo,” Tommy tries to remember how to speak without thinking. He thinks he’s fairly successful.

“What?” Wilbur actually stops, staring at him, almost alarmed.

Tommy stops too, turning back to face him, still trying to read his expression. “I said... would you talk about Limbo?” He repeats it slowly, carefully, waiting for a reaction.

“And you, are you going to talk about Dream?” Wilbur’s ask is more of a challenge. He’s defensive in an instant and he wants Tommy to be too.

Tommy scowls. “No.”

“Then fine, no. I won’t.”

“You’re being a bitch, Wilbur.”

“And *you’re* acting like a child,” Wilbur snaps.

Silence. They glare at each other and it’s probably the most eye contact they’ve made since coming back.

Then, Tommy snorts. “Fuckin’ right back to it, then, ay?”

“What?” Wilbur’s irritation fades to bemusement in an instant.

“We’re both so fuckin’ *fragile* and *delicate*,” Tommy says each word mockingly, “that no one will be a dick to us. Not in like, the chill usual way. Good to have that back, then, I guess.”

“You... you *want* someone to be mean to you?” Wilbur still doesn’t follow.

“No. Not like, not *mean* mean, not to hurt myself or whatever the fuck,” Tommy says quickly. People always assume the worst when he talks now. “But you know. Like the— Like the old days! Where we’d insult each other and get into trouble and shit. Now I just say dickish things and people just get uncomfortable like a bunch of pussies. Tubbo is more honest with me, but even him. Come on, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed how much people put up with your bullshit.”

“My bullshit?” Wilbur sputters.

“Oh, come *on*, man! You moping about, all sad and useless and shit! Yeah. No one has told you to get off your ass and stop pitying yourself, now, have they?” Tommy says, practical to a fault.

“I— I fucking guess?” Wilbur laughs. “You’re still such a little shit, you know that, don’t you?”

“Ex-act-ly,” Tommy enunciates every syllable. “And you’ve finally got the balls to tell me so!”

“So what?” Wilbur is grinning now. He’s missed following Tommy’s antics.

“So now, you get over yourself and...” Tommy’s grandiose and self important tone softens, the light fading from his eyes to something colder, more worried. “And now you man up and tell me what’s been going on in that fucked up head of yours.”

Wilbur sighs, but he doesn’t look defensive anymore, just so very *fond*. “You know what, fine. I will. Only if you talk about Dream and shit. Deal?”

Tommy scoffs, rolling his eyes. He mulls it over for a moment. “Yeah, right. Fine.”

A pause. They don’t keep walking.

“...Now what?” Wilbur says pointedly. “Do we want to play 20 questions?”

“Uh. Well. We’re due at Tubbo’s like, now. So,” Tommy sighs dramatically. “We’ll fuckin’... talk about it later, then.”

“Fine by me,” Wilbur huffs, continuing down the path.

They have about a minute of silence before Tommy breaks.

“Why’d you go there anyway?”

“What?”

“Pogtopia. What were you doing out there?” Tommy asks. He isn’t looking Wilbur in the eye, only stares resolutely straight ahead.

“Oh. Er, I was... Dunno. Just walking, really,” Wilbur shrugs. “And then I saw the hill, and the hole where we kept the horses and... well, how could I *not* go down at that point, you

know?”

“Yeah,” Tommy agrees more gloomily.

“What about you, then?”

“Wot?”

“Why’d you go back there?”

“To get you, dickhead.”

Wilbur laughs, before returning to a more somber tone. “*No*, I mean, before. I remember it. You went down there. With Ghostbur. Why?”

Tommy grimaces. “Thought we weren’t gonna talk about this shit now.”

“We’ve still got a little ways to go, right?”

“Fuckin’ dickhead...” Tommy mutters.

“Sure, say what you want, but still answer. I asked,” Wilbur pushes gently. “I’ll talk too. I will.”

“I went there ‘cause I wanted your fucking guitar. Alright?”

“Why did you—”

“Because I fuckin’ missed you. Is that what you want to hear?” Tommy snaps, still not looking Wilbur in the eye.

“Oh,” Wilbur doesn’t know what to do with that, with the funny sort of feeling that awakens in his chest. It’s *guilt*. He isn’t quite sure why.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, pathetic, so shut the fuck up,” Tommy scowls, walking faster.

“I wasn’t— I wasn’t gonna call you pathetic, Tommy,” Wilbur keeps pace easily, genuinely surprised. “Why the hell would I?”

“I— I dunno,” Tommy’s eyebrows furrow together. He’s still so defensive, he knows it’s not rational. Tommy can’t remember if he was like this before, or if this is another thing Dream had left him with.

“Look, look,” Wilbur stops him with a hand on his shoulder. “You know I missed you too, Tommy. And I’m not trying to push, I’m not, I just...” He stares at Tommy intently, like he’s trying to puzzle something out. “I feel like we talk less now than we did in Limbo.”

“Yeah, it’s been like, a few *weeks*, Wil,” Tommy shakes him off and keeps walking. “We’d have *months* where we didn’t talk at fuckin’ all. It just *feels* like it was a lot because that was *it*, y’know?”

“I... yeah, you’re right, you’re right,” Wilbur agrees reluctantly. A pause. “Can I be real with you?”

“Wot?”

Wilbur hesitates over his words and for once Tommy doesn’t move to fill the silence, he just waits. “I... don’t think I know how to be a person just yet,” Wilbur says carefully.

“Join the fuckin’ club,” Tommy scoffs.

“And I thought– Well, I know you get it, Tommy, but I thought maybe with you it would be easier. Maybe I shouldn’t have. It’s been... it’s been years since I last saw you. So, maybe I just don’t remember it all right,” Wilbur shrugs.

“I know, Wil,” Tommy is less defensive now, more weary. “I don’t think... I don’t think I know how to be around you, Wil. When I have a choice. We’d talk during all those months alone because there was literally nothing else. And we’d talk seriously when we thought I was gonna get hurt. Or about us getting out somehow. And at the time– then I thought we’d fix something. Like everything just clicked when we were– But it’s not, okay? It’s not.”

“I... I know,” Wilbur is doing his best not to look hurt. “I know I can’t understand it, not really. What you went through with Dream, and what that’s changed, god knows I haven’t helped. But I... I want to help *now*.”

Tommy considers this for a moment. “Well, I can’t understand what it’s like to be alone for ten fuckin’ years or whatever it was,” he mutters. “Dunno *how* to understand that shit. A- And you’re right, you can’t understand either.”

“You and I, we went through different kinds of hell, didn’t we? We saw each other’s, sure, your months alone and my few weeks with Dream, but that’s not *enough*, is it?” Wilbur says.

“No, it’s not,” Tommy’s jaw remains set and tense. “Great. We’ve talked about how much we don’t fuckin’ understand. This is real helpful, eh?” Tommy mutters, glowering at the cobblestone beneath them.

Wilbur puts a gentle hand on his shoulder, making him look up. Wilbur smiles, soft and fond. “Guess we’re supposed to talk about things anyway now, huh? And... try to understand.”

Tommy sighs, feigning irritation despite the warmth in his chest. “We can always try. That’s what Tubbo says anyway.”

“As always, Tubbo is right,” Wilbur laughs.

Tommy winces, pulling away, taking a few more steps down the railway before stopping again. “Nah. Can’t be.”

“Did I... Did I say something?” Wilbur is puzzled.



“Yeah. You did, you didn’t mean to, but you did,” Tommy scowls. “Tubbo isn’t always right.”

“Oh.” He realizes. “Exile,” Wilbur has a bitter taste in his mouth now. “Right.”

“Or... or maybe he was.” Tommy grows weary now. He had made his peace with Tubbo, made progress at least, but a bandaged wound still stings. “Didn’t have a choice, now, did he?”

“He can not have had a choice *and* still have made the wrong one, Tommy,” Wilbur says.

Tommy shrugs. “I mean, if I’d stayed, if we’d all fought Dream, win or lose, never would’ve gotten you back, would we?”

“Don’t– Don’t do that, Tommy,” Wilbur sighs. Tommy justifying his own suffering with *Wilbur*. That’s almost worse than Tommy resenting him.

“Do *what*, Wil?” Tommy snaps, turning back to face him. “You can’t fucking judge me for trying to clean up another one of *your* messes. *You* did this, remember? You’re the fucking reason we lost you the first time ‘round.”

Wilbur isn’t quite surprised, but something close to it. Instead, he resigns himself to it. He knows Tommy is right in every word of it. “Now we’re back to our chats in Limbo, right?” He sighs, scuffing his boots on the ground. “Misery loves company...”

“Fucking hell,” Tommy huffs. His cane clatters to the ground, he sits, legs swinging off the path, the trees below swirling in the breeze. “Sit with me. And we’d better tell Tubbo we’ll be late for dinner, I guess.”

“Yeah?” Wilbur sits beside him, not quite touching shoulders. He puts the guitar case down carefully on his other side. He can’t resist a bit of comfort in the sight of the trees below. Every time he remembers the world is living and breathing around him is a relief.

“So. You talk about Limbo, I talk about Dream,” Tommy reiterates, waiting like he’s expecting something to happen from that.

“Easier said than done,” Wilbur sighs, leaning back, arms supporting him and palms pressed to the cobblestone.

“A lot of things are *easier said than done*,” Tommy says mockingly.

“Maybe we’re... Maybe we’re meant to start with something else?” Wilbur offers.

“We talk about something else to talk about the thing we’re supposed to be talking about?” Tommy scoffs.

“Well, what do you suggest, then?”

“Dunno,” Tommy shrugs. “I’d rather talk about something good. Not just... dig into the fucked up shit.”

“Something good?”

“Yeah.” A pause. “Don’t look at me, I don’t know what the fuck that’d be. I’ve spent the last year begging for my life in a prison cell, remember?”

“I spent the last decade with no one to beg *to*.”

Tommy hits Wilbur’s shoulder with his own. “Fucking show off. Come on, then. You’re the one who’s good with words and shit, right? Tell me something good.”

Wilbur laughs, thinking. These past weeks, he’s spent so much time just feeling and taking at all in. He’d spent less time thinking. He’s alive again. The question from his first dawn back returns, still unanswered. *Now what?*

“We’re not here just to suffer. Being alive is meant to be worth something. I don’t feel that way just yet, but I refuse to let myself think that it’s not.” Coming from Wilbur, those words feel like a precious, breakable thing.

Tommy gives him a funny look, surprised and maybe almost impressed, but there’s something jaded there too. “Yeah? Where was this attitude in Pogtopia?” He says it scathingly.

A moment of pause, Wilbur staring at him, taken aback by his daring. This could end in bitterness, in resentment. From either of them. Instead Tommy laughs, barking and sharp, and Wilbur can’t help but laugh too.

“Right, then. You got me there, I’ll admit it,” Wilbur shakes his head. “I guess we’re at the point where laughing about that shit only makes sense, huh?”

“Now here you go with this bloody fucking optimism, those Ghostbur bits really worked wonders on you...” Tommy scoffs. A pause, that moment of ease fading with the sun as it begins to brush the distant treeline. Tommy’s lip trembles for a moment before his expression turns to something more grim. His gaze remains locked on the horizon, jaw tense. The sky has turned orange and pink again. He gets tired of a lot of things since being back, the world overwhelming all the time, but he never gets tired of the sunsets. “I have spent so much time fighting to believe that too. That the world is worth it— And maybe it is, Wil. I’d believe that. I’d believe the world is... is worth living in. It’s just... it’s harder to believe I can do this. That... that *I’m* alive enough to live in it. That I’m not just some corpse wiggling around in a live body. And it was fucking hard before Dream ruined me, so now it’s just— *Fuck*,” Tommy lays back on the path, hands covering his face.

Wilbur spends too long trying to process those words. “Dream didn’t...” Wilbur’s chest aches as he looks back at Tommy, at his hands on his face, at the finger missing from his left hand, a physical representation of what happened to him, a microcosm in an ocean of suffering. “He didn’t ruin you, Tommy.”

“Yeah?” Tommy sighs, uncovering his eyes. “You don’t get to be the one to say that, alright? You don’t—” Tommy thinks back on another conversation, explaining to Tubbo that his Tommyinnit stayed gone. “You don’t get to decide what survived of me.”

“I– Yeah,” Wilbur concedes reluctantly. “I don’t. I just...” Another pause. He sighs, laying back beside Tommy. “I’ve got nothing I can say that’ll change your mind.”

“Well spotted. Sharp as a tack, you are.”

“But let me try anyway, alright?” Wilbur says with weak irritation. “*Something* survived of you, right? Who else would I be talking to right now? So... as long as this bit of you is here, you can... It’s like New L’Manberg. You all built that beautiful thing over the mess I made. So, you rebuild, right?”

“How *poetic*, ” Tommy tries to stay jaded and harsh, but that had done the trick. Wilbur had brought L’Manberg into things, and that always makes a difference. Tommy feels a lump in his throat, the clouds above blurred by tears. “I tried to kill myself again, you know. I properly did. After I got saved and everything. Not knowing if Dream would be able to fix it and I tried– I tried to–”

“Yeah, I know.”

Tommy turns to look at him sharply, surprised, almost defensive.

Wilbur just looks sad. “I could feel it. You getting closer, same way I felt it last time.” A pause. “It was because of me, wasn’t it?” Tommy doesn’t answer, but silence from him says enough. Wilbur nods, as if replying to that unspoken confirmation. “I am... so sorry, Tommy.”

“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t choose to stay gone.”

“Yeah, but it’s like you said, isn’t it? I chose to *leave*, ” Wilbur shoots back sharply. He sighs. “I know we’ve already been through that bit. In Limbo. But I just...” A pause, Wilbur looking up at the darkening sky instead of over at his brother. “I couldn’t do better then and now I can. So I *promise* you, Tommy. We’re going to make it. You and I, we owe it to each other.”

Tommy stares at him, and if Wilbur had been looking, he would’ve seen that old glow in his eyes of a boy who would have followed him anywhere, who *believes* him. Tommy sees how much has changed and for once it doesn’t scare him. Wilbur promising him hope, the same promises Tommy had given him back in Pogtopia. The difference is, Tommy is going to listen. Tommy is going to live.

## Chapter End Notes

wooo long time no see! Life has been busy!

also writer's block is a demon and I need an exorcism. writing recovery is always harder than writing horror, y'know?

Originally, I was planning on this being the second to last chapter, but as of, I don't know if I can resolve enough in just one more chapter! But we're down to the final few, I'll tell you that much.

Hope this update was worth the wait! As always, feedback is cherished <3

# Chapter 35

## Chapter Notes

CW: mentions of abuse and past violence. As well as poor mental health and disassociation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Do you think they got stuck again?” Tubbo asks as he stares at the two empty chairs beside them.

“Hm?” Ranboo glances out the window of Tubbo’s home, the sky having turned dark. “Did you message him?”

“Yeah. He responded. Asked if Wilbur could come.”

“Then probably not.” *Getting stuck*. They don’t really have another way to describe it. Returning home to a dark house thinking no one is there only to find Wilbur and Tommy sitting in silence, this strange look in both of their eyes, blank. Almost dead. “Maybe he had to go get Wilbur?” Ranboo shrugs.

“Yeah. Maybe,” Tubbo frowns. “Is it just me or have they been doing it more lately?”

“What? Getting stuck?”

“Yeah.”

Ranboo hums as he considers this. “Well, yeah. I mean, I thought that was why you were trying to get them to spend time away from each other.”

“Am I being too pushy about it, d’you think?”

“No, no I don’t think so. I know Tommy likes spending time with you. And I don’t mind Wilbur, really, I don’t. He’s... interesting,” Ranboo mulls it over. “And Phil wants to spend time with him too, of course. I know things have been quieter in general since that whole Banquet... situation, but once things sort of even out, I bet other people will want to spend time with Wilbur too.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah?” Ranboo looks at him, surprised. “Do you not? I thought...” Ranboo doesn’t know what he thought. There are two conflicting versions of Wilbur that he has a vague idea of. One being the man who destroyed L’Manberg and hurt his friends, who had once been good but had long since turned away from the light, and the other being Tommy’s big brother who

did whatever he could to save him. Although, Ranboo supposes, atoning to Tommy doesn't mean he's atoned to everyone else. "I don't know. And either way, I don't know if keeping them apart will stop them from doing that. I mean, I think we've got to figure out a... different solution."

"Any ideas?"

"Well, no," Ranboo frowns. "It's not really *hurting* them, though, is it?"

"When they don't eat or move all day, yeah. It is."

"Ah. Yep, yep, point taken."

"HELLO?" Tommy shouts through the front door.

Tubbo goes to answer it, looking irritable instead of amused. "And *where* have you been?" He stares at Tommy, hands on his hips like a disappointed parent.

Tommy's teasing grin turns to confusion. "Ey?"

"You said you were coming to dinner *an hour ago*," Tubbo snaps.

"Quit naggin', what are you, my mum?" Tommy raises his hands defensively. "Not like you've got to worry about Dream nabbin' me anymore, so what? Have a carrot, calm yourself."

Tubbo accepts the carrot without really thinking about it, but it surprised him enough that his irritation waned. "I... I know Dream isn't a problem anymore but it's a bit hard to just... to just adjust to that. Just— Just *tell* me when you're gonna fall off the map like that. Especially when we had plans."

Tommy looks guilty now. "Sorry. I didn't— We were gonna message you, just forgot. Got distracted."

*We.* This draws Tubbo's attention to the other tall and vaguely guilty looking person darkening his doorstep.

"Sorry, Tubbo. I think I was supposed to message you. Still not used to the whole..." Wilbur gestures vaguely in the air. "...communicating thing."

Tubbo stares at Wilbur's side. "You have your guitar."

"What—? Oh. Yeah. I got it from Pogtopia earlier," Wilbur almost looks embarrassed.

Tubbo looks to Tommy. "*Pogtopia*? That's why you were late?"

"Uhhh. Yeah, I guess," Tommy shifts uncomfortably.

Tubbo takes the hint and changes the subject, even if he wants to push. "Well, maybe 'cause you're late you don't get to eat any of Ranboo's fantastic cooking," Tubbo dropped the carrot

back on the dining table.

“Uh,” Ranboo isn’t sure which part he wants to protest more, Tubbo’s pettiness or calling his cooking *fantastic*. Edible was more how Ranboo might put it.

“Fine, then. I want my carrot back,” Tommy says stuffily.

A pause, Ranboo glancing to Wilbur to see if he had any better luck figuring out what the fuck was going on between the two of them. Wilbur looked amused if not mildly confused.

“Dickhead,” Tubbo rolls his eyes, returning to his seat at the table. “Well, come on then. Sit down. I got a fuckton of cod from the guardian farm, so. Thought we might as well actually eat some of it.”

Tommy takes his seat beside Tubbo and Wilbur the seat across from him.

“So, what did you boys do today?” Tommy leans back in his seat, letting it tip back on two legs dangerously.

“Guardian farm, so. A lot of time just traveling in a boat,” Ranboo shrugs.

“Surprised you like going to the guardian farm, Ranboo. Bit wet for you, hm?” Tommy teases.

“...No. I wear armor, remember?” Ranboo says dryly.

“Oooh asking me if I *remember* bold claim for you, isn’t it?” Tommy scoffs.

“Wait, you can’t... you’re an enderman...ish kind of guy. So, you can’t actually go in water?” Wilbur watches Ranboo curiously.

“Uhh nope.”

“How do you... *drink*?”

“Uh. If it’s not just straight up water it’s usually fine. Milk, tea, potions. Y’know,” Ranboo shrugs.

“And what about like... showering or washing your hands? Do you like, roll in dust like a chinchilla?” Wilbur seems genuinely intrigued.

Tubbo chokes on his drink, sputtering and wheezing until Tommy hits his back. Tubbo coughs, giggles still coming out as he tries to inhale.

Ranboo tries to look annoyed, it’s far from genuine. “...No. I don’t roll in dust, actually, if you need to know I drink a fire res potion and go in lava.”

Wilbur’s fascination only grows. “And... that... *works*?”

“Uh. Yep. So far,” Ranboo gives Tubbo a look as he continues to bury laughter.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Tubbo says, not sounding sorry at all. “Just– Just the thought of you rolling in the dirt– honestly, sounds like something Tommy would do–”

“Oy!” Tommy puts. “I mean, you’re not wrong, but–”

Wilbur laughs, loud and high, it fills the room. Tommy and Tubbo pause, for a moment exchanging a shared look of surprise and almost relief, an unspoken *you heard it too, right?*

They can’t remember the last time they heard Wilbur laugh like that. It feels older than so many things. Older than Pogtopia, even.

It’s more than a kindness to hear it again, it’s another resurrection.

Dinner is a simple thing. Laughter and warm food and a gentle sleepiness overtaking them.

“Ranboo, you sit. You cooked, I’ve got dishes,” Tubbo says firmly when Ranboo starts to get up.

“I could– I could help, if you want. We’re the guests,” Wilbur fumbles over his words. He hasn’t attempted politeness or courtesy in a long time.

Tubbo looks surprised. “Uh. Sure, Wilbur. Kitchen is through here,” Tubbo nods him back through a doorway.

Tommy sighs dramatically. “So, Ranboob. Are you or are you not currently *living with* Tubbo?”

Ranboo almost chokes on his drink. “What’d– What’d you mean by that?”

Tommy looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Dunno. What do *you* think I mean by it?”

“Uhhhh.”

The calm and laughter of the dining room stagnates into something more awkward as Tubbo and Wilbur enter the kitchen.

“Um. I wash, you dry?” Wilbur offers halfheartedly.

“Usually I wash. Ranboo dries because, you know, water.”

“Right,” Wilbur concedes. He stands there awkwardly, waiting for Tubbo to finish washing the first bowl. He watches Tubbo’s face carefully as Tubbo just stares down at the sink. Wilbur hadn’t remembered Tubbo’s scars looking so dark. Although, maybe they’d just been redder the last time Wilbur had seen him because they were still relatively new. “You know, it’s okay that you’re angry with me. I’d be surprised if you weren’t, to be honest. Tommy and me– Well, let’s just say we’ve already had our months of Tommy being pissed until... somehow, fuck if I know by what miracle he did, he forgave me. But you don’t have to do that and if you hate me, that’s alright.”

Tubbo frowns, shoving a bowl his way but not looking up.



“Sorry, man, I probably shouldn’t have... shouldn’t have dropped that on you,” Wilbur takes it, shoulders hunched as if trying to make himself smaller. “I... I left you with a nation— a— a *crater*. You were just a kid and I—”

“You can quit that now, Wilbur,” Tubbo is sharp.

“Sorry.”

“No,” Tubbo sighs irritably. “Don’t be sorry. I’m not—” Tubbo keeps washing what’s in front of him, not looking up. “Yeah, I have every right to hate you for what you did. But, I gotta be honest, I really don’t.”

“You... don’t?” Wilbur is taken aback, startled and fumbling as Tubbo hands him another bowl. He feels a sharp jolt of panic as he almost drops it. He’s already broken so much in Tubbo’s life. He can’t break his dishes too.

“Not really,” Tubbo gives him a look, stern but not unkind in a way that inexplicably reminds Wilbur of how Phil would act when he was getting into trouble as a kid. It makes his guilt spark just a bit louder at the thought of how old Tubbo seems. Tubbo continues, “mostly I’m just worried.”

“Worried?”

“About Tommy.”

“Oh,” Wilbur nods, understanding.

“And you.”

“O-Oh?” Wilbur’s voice grows hoarser, weak and emotional. He looks away for a moment, quickly brushing his eyes. “Careful. You’ll make me cry.”

Tubbo laughs. “I mean it. The two of you...” Tubbo pauses. He doesn’t know how to explain it in a way that seems fair. So he tries something else. Tubbo always does better when he has data to work with. “How does Tommy seem to you? Now, compared to when you were together in Limbo.”

Wilbur considers this carefully, stacking the dried bowls on the counter. “Better. Better by a fucking mile.”

“But?”

“But...” Wilbur sighs. “I guess I’m worried too. All the time. About everything,” after Wilbur says this he feels a spark of panic. It feels too honest, too vulnerable. His instinct tells him to regret sharing it, but he can’t bring himself to when for the first time he might actually have someone to share this weight with. “Although,” he clears his throat loudly. “Not to shabby, right? I’m not dead anymore. Can’t complain.”

“Hm,” Tubbo almost sounds surprised.

“What?”

“Do *you* think you’re not dead anymore?”

Wilbur stares at him with wide eyes. “*What?*”

“Well,” it’s Tubbo’s turn to be uncomfortable. “You don’t exactly act like you know you’re alive. You– and Tommy, really– act... not alive, is what I’m saying.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Well,” Tubbo looks at him, eyebrows furrowed together. “What have *you* been worried about, then, if not this?”

Wilbur exhales the air from his cheeks, leaning against the counter as he ponders this. “I guess I’m more worried about the stuff I don’t understand. Tommy is... different. And– in theory– I know *why* that is, but in practice it’s a *bit* more enigmatic.”

“Fair point,” Tubbo agrees, thinking it over. “I know I don’t understand a lot of it, but you were... you were there for bits of it. So... what do *you* not understand?”

“So fucking much,” Wilbur says with a dry laugh. “I saw the... the aftermath, mostly. What I did see in person was brief and I *hope* it was you know, one of the worse examples. Dream was batshit insane and Tommy was sort of... I dunno.”

“What?” Tubbo pushes.

Wilbur frowns, thinking it over carefully. “He was... fragile. Insubstantial, even. That’s putting it lightly, but I don’t know how else to say it. They’re just... When he was around Dream, it was like he shut down. He was scared, sure. And I wouldn’t expect Tommy to have argued or fought back like he would’ve back in the day, but I guess I expected more... struggle.” A pause, Tubbo waits. Wilbur cannot stop himself from being pulled into a spiral of darker thoughts. “And I ended up freaking out, trying to get Dream’s attention, but what really scared me wasn’t merely Dream about to hurt him– It was that Tommy was going to *let* him,” Wilbur shudders.

“What do you mean?” Tubbo asks even as he knows the answer, even as he feels white hot, useless rage.

“Dream was gonna– I think he was gonna cut off his thumb? That’s what looked like, at least, and when Dream asked for his hand, Tommy just... he just offered. He could’ve tried to run before and I guess I sort of get why Tommy wouldn’t have tried to run, it would be too easy for Dream to grab him, but Dream didn’t even have to grab his hand. He just had to– to *ask*.” Wilbur’s nose crinkles in disgust.

“Oh.” Tubbo hadn’t known all that. The glimpses of Tommy’s reality, of his corpse battered and bruised, of Dream keeping him pinned to the wall with a knife poised and ready, those had already been too much. Wilbur’s experiences are a shred more. None of it really shows a full picture. They don’t want a full picture. Rather, they just wish there was something

they could know, some piece of it all that meant they could stop Tommy from flinching when people got too close, they could make eating no longer such a task for him, to stop him from getting nervous if left alone too long, and those dark moments, the really bad ones, where Tommy sees someone with a sword and his first instinct is to beg them to stop.

Nothing they can do will make them understand it nor make it easier to help him, but the truth of it is it doesn't matter. No one can understand what he's been through, not Wilbur, not anyone. But they're going to walk him home anyway. They're going to stay with him until he falls asleep, they're going to leave doors open and unlocked, they're going to kill mobs before they can even get close, they're going to bandage his knuckles and tell him he hasn't done anything wrong, they're going to tell him he is alive and he is safe as many times as he needs to hear it.

They're never going to understand but they're never going to stop trying either.

"You know, I am sorry, Tubbo. Sorry that me leaving hurt you both so badly. I'm sorry that I chose for it to be that way. I know I've been a bad person so maybe I don't deserve to live again—"

"No," Tubbo says sharply.

"N-No?"

"No," he repeats, staring Wilbur down, unwavering. "Whatever the side effects, you being back has helped Tommy more than anything else. So. Don't apologize or dick around about it. Keeping being there for him." Unspoken in his request, *keep being alive for him*.

"R-Right," Wilbur nods, eyes wide. Tubbo's previous sentiment, *"I'm worried about him. And you."* circles his thoughts with a gentle ache. "I— I will."

"Good," Tubbo gives him a more approving look. "Now hush up and keep drying."

Whatever resolution Tubbo and Wilbur had found, it's still a relief to leave the tension behind and return to the dining room where Tommy continues to tease Ranboo.

Wilbur yawns. "It's getting late, I should probably head out. Tommy, you coming or staying?"

Tommy slumps down in his chair, "I'm comfortable now. Not movin'."

Wilbur laughs. "Right, fine. I'll see you later, then. Ranboo, Tubbo," he gives them each a nod, turning up the collar of his coat as he heads out.

"Oy! If you're not gonna wear armor, be careful, Wil!" Tommy shouts after him.

"You know I will, Tommy!" Wilbur replies just before the door shuts behind him. Wilbur says it and almost surprises himself because it's not a lie. He'll be careful now, because he knows there are people who need him alive.

“Sorry to crash here, boys,” Tommy says, not sounding particularly sorry at all. “But I feel like I’ve pretty much claimed that couch. And Ranboo is basically moved in, so. Not like he’s been using it.”

Ranboo sinks down in his chair, one cheek blushing red, the other blushing green.

Tubbo raises an eyebrow. “He say something to you, Ranboo?”

“Not really. It’s more what he *didn’t* say, actually...”

“Hey, I’m fine,” Tommy raises his hands passively. “If the two of you want to do this, I don’t care. As long as he makes you happy.”

Tubbo smiles, fond to the last. “And what about you then?”

“About me what?” Tommy almost looks startled. He laughs, a low, awkward chuckle.

“Look, Tubbo, you’re a... a great fella, but I don’t think I’m—”

“No,” Tubbo laughs, rolling his eyes, “I mean...” Tubbo tries to keep his lighter tone “Are you actually happy?”

Tommy is left fumbling. “What a fucking question to drop on a man— Have a bit more subtlety, will you?” Tommy sighs heavily. “Could you at least be more specific?”

Ranboo sits up, hesitating between words. “How are you... dealing with all this?” Ranboo asks carefully. “D’you think?”

“Dealing with what?” Tommy frowns.

“With... y’know, Wilbur being back.”

“What’s there to *deal with*. This is the *good* bit,” Tommy scoffs. “I got him back, I’m not having to *deal* with anything.”

Tubbo gives him a look. “You know what, I think you’re full of shit.”

“Don’t call me a fuckin’ liar!” Tommy snaps, with little malice behind his words.

“If this isn’t at least a *little* stressful for you, I’d be more worried, actually,” Tubbo says pointedly.

Tommy mulls this over, reluctant to agree. “And what of it, then?”

Tubbo and Ranboo share a look.

“Fucking hell— Have you two been fussing over me?” Tommy grumbles.

“Do you expect us not to, bossman?”

“Wilbur is not making me worse,” Tommy snaps.

“We never said he was,” Ranboo tries to placate him.

“So— So what are you saying, then?” Tommy doesn’t know why he’s so defensive.

The question Ranboo wants to ask is not a kind one, so he doesn’t say it. He just waits and hopes Tubbo will say something better.

*How are you living?*

Tubbo seems as unsure as Ranboo feels.

“Y’know, you and Wilbur, you don’t...” Ranboo glances to Tubbo for help once more, but Tubbo is still trying to read Tommy. “... *do* much.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“You’re a bit...” Tubbo tries to think of a better answer. “...aimless?”

“What’d you mean, I’ve got to have an *aim*? Eh? Why’s that?” Tommy is defensive on instinct, but he understands. He knows exactly what the two of them mean but that doesn’t mean he likes it. “I don’t know how,” he says hoarsely.

“How what, Tommy?” Tubbo asks.

“I dunno how to... how to exist. Without, like, a goal. Any goal. All of this shit— I always had a purpose didn’t I? Even if it was just... avoiding pain for a long time,” Tommy’s hands fidget restlessly, drumming on the table as he stares off into space. “So, you’re right. Me and Wil— We don’t do nothing. I don’t...” Tommy gets quiet, like these words aren’t really meant for anyone else. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do when I have a choice.”

“Tommy...” Tubbo doesn’t know what to say.

“No, no— listen, alright? I haven’t— I haven’t chosen fuck all for myself in... well, I dunno, a year? Almost nothing has been in my control until very fucking recently, so forgive me if I have no fucking clue what I’m meant to do now,” Tommy grows harsh. That’s easier than confronting the fact that he scares himself. “I don’t know what to *do*,” he says softly, rocking slightly in his chair. “What the fuck do I do? I don’t—” Tommy gets quiet, a gruff exhale of panic. He’s *really* fucking scared now. “I don’t remember what I fucking *do*. Alright? Before all this— What the fuck did I *do*? B-Before all this, there was— There was defacing George’s house?” He looks to Ranboo almost frantically. “A-And we saw how that turned out. And before that it was dead Wil—” Tommy cuts himself off with a barking, almost hysterical laugh. “He was fuckin’ dead and the war was over so I didn’t do much of anything! Before then it was the war and I know I said after the war I was gonna get the discs back from Dream but I did that bit I guess and I don’t feel like I *won* though, I didn’t *win* them back I barely fucking survived him so it’s not like it was a fucking accomplishment it was just *done* and now I don’t know what to do—” He looks to Tubbo, eyes wide and pleading. “What the fuck do I *do*?”

Tubbo doesn't know how to answer him. Tubbo wasn't *allowed* to do nothing. He had a nation to run and then he had a dead best friend and he *still* had a nation to run. So finding projects almost felt like an escape from his real responsibilities. He and Ranboo built the apiary because if he hadn't Tubbo would've lost his fucking mind trying to keep L'Manberg together. And now...

He won't tell Tommy this, but Tommy is his L'Manberg now. Something he's responsible for. The main backtrack of Tubbo's life right now is trying to help Tommy be okay again and the rest of it all is just keeping himself sane. None of them know a fucking healthy way to live. Not since L'Manberg. *Real*, true, original L'Manberg. That was a long time ago.

Tubbo doesn't want to let down his walls, he doesn't want to let *Tommy* down by telling him he doesn't have an answer. He doesn't have many options, so maybe something honest and hard and even a little unfair is the best he can do.

"I have no fucking idea, bossman. I haven't like, been a person since... well, the election, I'd say," Tubbo needs to say something to salvage all this. "But we... we can try and remember how together, alright? We used to do things together... maybe— Maybe we just need another good old scam to run, right? For old time's sake?" Tubbo hopes Tommy can't hear the desperation in his voice.

Tommy is listening, but he can't stop staring at Wilbur's guitar case by the door. Wilbur had left it here. Tommy knows it isn't right nor fair, but he can't help but think any hope of him getting better is tied to Wilbur. Tied to Tubbo too. Everything he is, everything that survived of him, is wrapped up in other people.

Ranboo follows Tommy's gaze. Now is as good a time as any to bring it up. "You and Wilbur, Tommy," Ranboo begins slowly. "You... you know when you guys do that thing? You both sort of... stop?"

"Stop? The fuck d'you mean, stop?" Tommy is shaken from his spiral by confusion.

"Well," Ranboo glances to Tubbo for support. "Like, you both just..."

"You shut down, bossman," Tubbo offers. "You both sort of... fade off and just... you know, when you both get stuck."

"Oh," Tommy understands now. "And what about it?"

"Well, I think— I mean, I don't know, really, but I'd imagine that... you guys sort of getting stuck might be connected to the other stuff too?" Ranboo offers uncertainly.

"The fuck do you want me to do about it?" Tommy scowls.

"This isn't— we're not mad about it or— or being critical, we're just..." Ranboo struggles to explain.

"We're worried," Tubbo finishes for him.

“I don’t– I don’t know how to fucking fix that any more than I can fix the rest of it!” Tommy snaps.

“We’re not expecting you to just find a way to *fix* things, but I think when we... when we asked about Wilbur and how you were doing with him being back... again, I’m not blaming anyone,” Ranboo says quickly, “but you started getting stuck when Wilbur came back. You both would get like that.”

“O-Okay, and?!” Tommy hopes he sounds more frustrated than nervous. He doesn’t deal well with criticism nowadays.

“We just wanna help,” Tubbo says carefully. “I was thinking. You and Wilbur should try to... to have things you plan on doing so you don’t end up just sitting in the dark.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Tubbo glances back to the guitar case by the door. He doesn’t say anything. Tommy’s irritation dies easily as he follows his gaze. “I miss it too,” Tommy says quietly.

“Do you think he would?”

“I don’t know if he’s... ready,” Tommy says carefully. “Just like it took a while for me to be ready to... to get into trouble again.”

“Maybe you should start small then,” Tubbo offers.

“Oh yeah, and what would that be?”

“Um. Selling drugs?”

Tubbo and Tommy stare at each other for a moment, they burst out laughing, much to Ranboo’s bafflement. The absurdity of it all feels safe. Safer than a lot of things have felt lately.

“The cure to all of our ills, eh? Selling drugs,” Tommy nods sagely.

“Couldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah,” Tommy doesn’t know if he should feel better from such a small, useless thing. It’s not a plan nor a solution by any means, it’s literally and perfectly a joke. But it’s something. “Couldn’t hurt.”

## Chapter End Notes

Uh. Hi. Long time no see.

Sorry, y'all! I had finals and was very busy and my plans are making it harder to update this fic lol. Basically, I want to finish the bad ending au before I finish the main fic, because I want the finale/last thing I post for this story to be the true, happy ending. So. I gotta churn out a lot of bad before I can end this one! Idk. I did this to myself.

[\(I mean, I have done some other writing lately. like this conversation between Tommy and his younger self.\)](#)

thank you guys for being patient, I hope this was a good read either way! :D



# Chapter 36

## Chapter Notes

CW: mentions of eating disorders and suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur is still unaccustomed to having a sword in his hands, the weight of armor on his shoulders. Tommy stands across from him, frame set, a serious frown across his face as he holds his sword and shield more carefully. They're both already doing better. Their first efforts had been more challenging.

It had been Tommy's idea of course. "I've been itching for a fuckin' fight! You gotta get trained up, Wilbur! You used to be a general look at you now!"

Tommy had been the one pushing to spar up until Wilbur was standing in front of him with a sword. Wilbur had assumed his grave expression had been one of focus. Wilbur swung first, expecting Tommy to parry it easily as he always had.

Tommy had flinched, dropping his sword from trembling hands and falling back onto the ground hard, scrambling away, desperately kicking at the dirt trying to get an inch more distance between himself and a blade. Tommy didn't try to run. He just curled into as tight of a ball as he could manage and covered his eyes.

Wilbur had dropped his sword and rushed to Tommy's side, horrified despite this in no way being his fault as Tommy flinches yet again when Wilbur had placed a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Tommy, Tommy you're okay. You're alright, man. It's just me. I don't have the sword or— or anything, alright? You're okay. You're okay."

Tommy came back to himself bitter and furious, shaking off Wilbur's gentle hand and grabbing his sword.

"I think— I think we should stop," Wilbur stood, stepping away from him, still trying to give him space.

Tommy had glared at him. "No, no we keep fucking going."

And they did. For the rest of that day, they'd kept going until Wilbur thought his arm was going to fall off, until it got hard to breathe, whether the few years of smoking or the time dead, Wilbur felt like his lungs were not built for this. But Tommy had stopped flinching at every blow by sunset, at least enough to keep fighting even when it scared him. Maybe not the healthiest means of progress, maybe not even progress at all, but surely something like it.

They kept going. Not every day, but often. Tommy always being the one insisting and Wilbur unable to say no. So they continue. Now in diamond armor with iron swords, a nice compromise from being fully kitted in netherite or just hitting each other with wooden swords.

Wilbur still isn't very good at this, but if Tommy wants him to keep going, he will. So Wilbur steps to the right.

Tommy follows, stepping to his left with a careful, calculated footfall, always measuring up his bad leg against the distance to the ground.

Wilbur rarely swings first. Tommy used to always be the first to act. Instead for the both of them there's always a pause, both of them circling, not wanting to make the first blow. Wilbur, after decades of everything moving so slowly, is still surprised by how quick things change around him.

Tommy swings first, low to the ground, trying to get under his guard. Wilbur neglects his shield with a yelp, instead, hopping away like he'd just almost stepped in lava.

"Ha!" Tommy almost growls as he gears up to ram his shoulder against Wilbur's with his shield.

Wilbur keeps stumbling back, just managing to get out of the way as Tommy struggles to shift his left side, instead almost tumbling into the grass.

"Ha!" Wilbur jeers back.

"Fuckin' dickhead, I'll cut you, bitch!" Tommy turns around, jumping back as Wilbur tries to hit his sword arm. "Come on, Wil! You should at least *try*."

"Annoying child!"

"Stupid fucking adult!" Tommy hits his shield against Wilbur's knocking him back a few feet. "You wish— You fucking *wish* you were as strong as me!"

Wilbur tries to hit Tommy's right knee, but Tommy blocks it easily, taking the chance to land a blow against Wilbur's left shoulder, sending him stumbling back.

"Point, me!" Tommy shouts. "Why do you even try anymore?" He grins. Tommy is, even after all that time out of practice, undeniably a better fighter than Wilbur. Wilbur has yet to actually *win* one of their rounds, at most managing to trip Tommy up. "I'm getting bored."

"Do you want to stop, then?" Wilbur says wearily. He's out of breath already.

"Nah, I wanna shake things up a bit!" Tommy says. "Grab an axe."

"An *axe*? I never use an axe. And neither do you," Wilbur grumbles.

"*Hence*, shaking things up," Tommy nods resolutely.

Wilbur takes the axe, it feels so much clunkier and unsteady than the sword he'd slowly readjusted to over the past days.

Things are different immediately. First, Wilbur fails even more miserably than he had before, the axe is too top heavy and he keeps on hitting far lower than he aims. Tommy nails him in the chest enough to leave a bruise, Wilbur steps back with a gasp. Tommy stops for a moment, staring at Wilbur's chestplate. Wilbur takes the opening, not even aiming for Tommy, but cracking down on his shield. Tommy gasps, stumbling back as his hand struggles to keep ahold of the shield, it slips through his weakened grip, caught just enough that the weight of Wilbur's axe sends him tumbling to the ground with it, his bad leg unable to catch him.

"Fuck!" This time Tommy doesn't merely complain or reply to taunts, genuine frustration bleeds through as he throws aside both axe and shield.

"Aw, sorry, Tommy. I never win. It was just the one hit, right? You're still winning." Wilbur hesitates, axe loose at his side.

Tommy gives him a scathing look. "Don't patronize me."

"I'm not."

"Okay, well, it is *not* just one fucking hit, then," he snaps, kicking his axe away. "You've been holding your own past few weeks, haven't you?" Tommy says gloomily.

Wilbur stares at him baffled. "I don't think I'm supposed to say thank you."

"I used to be fucking *better*, Wil!" Tommy snaps. "Now I can't even use a fucking shield properly 'cause it's too heavy or big or whatever and now it's like I'm all wiggly or fragile or some shit..." Tommy tucks his knees into his chest, having to move his left leg closer using his arm to support it. He stares ruefully at his left hand. "It's just... It's just one fucking finger, why does it make it so hard?" His voice gets shakier, less anger, more bitter exhaustion.

Wilbur drops his axe, sitting in the grass across from him. "To be fair, you still *are* better than me, you know."

"Used to be *more* better," Tommy grumbles. "I was..." Tommy's voice breaks, he clears his throat, fighting for calm. "I was almost like... more okay with the fucking limp, even if that like, actually literally hurts more, 'cause it was because something I did. This one..." his left hand balls into a fist, "I fucking *hate* because *he* fucking did it. It was... it was something forced on me I had no say in and it's never going to fucking go away."

Wilbur nods. "I mean, not quite the same, but..." Wilbur pulls back his cheek, revealing the gap in the back of his mouth where a tooth had once been. Tommy stares and maybe he does feel something like relief, or if not relief, solidarity.

"It fucking sucks, right?" Wilbur's words come out muddled and strange.

“Stop making that stupid fucking face,” Tommy tries to scold him instead of showing anymore vulnerability.

“Why? Something about this funny to you?” Wilbur keeps talking, giving Tommy a look of offended surprise with his raised eyebrows.

Tommy snorts, badly burying a laugh. “Fuck off.”

“If you insist,” Wilbur gets his hand out of his mouth and goes to dry it on Tommy’s shirt.

Tommy shrieks, jolting back. “You’re fucking disgusting!”

Wilbur cackles.

“Aren’t you supposed to be making *me* feel better?” Tommy pouts. “You’re so mean!”

“Fine, fine. I’ll be nice. I’ll make it up to you— How about you pick lunch? I’ll get it,” Wilbur is feeling quite pleased with his own generosity, but Tommy gives him a look that looks far too thoughtful, too much mischief and careful calculation. “...What’d you want?”

Wilbur knows Tommy did this on purpose.

Tommy was not short on food, nor did he need a specific type of bread from the middle of fucking nowhere, no, rather, Tommy had figured out the easiest way to get Wilbur to talk to Niki and then he’d pushed. Wilbur had made something like progress in the past weeks, he’d spoken briefly with Jack, finding a young man with less anger and more confidence. Seeing Fundy had been much more painful, he returned to the Mainlands only at Tommy’s request, and when he had finally spoken to his father he’d mostly had questions. Tommy had killed himself, just like Wilbur, but now they were both back and death was never the solution once offered. Fundy had treaded carefully around the subject and by the end of it, neither hatred nor peace was found between them, but something in between. Fundy had carefully explained he was moving to Niki’s secret city. She’d extended the invite when she’d left Drywaters. It hadn’t been an invitation, but Wilbur was grateful to find Fundy was okay with Wilbur knowing where he was.

Wilbur had spoken with Eret more extensively, that had been hard at first and then so much easier. Eret had beaten Wilbur to the punch. He supposes that’s easier to do when you’re still alive, but Wilbur had spoken with Eret about his own post-mortem— *mid-* mortem?— atonement and Eret replied in turn. Eret had helped Tommy with his efforts to try to bring him back. Eret was one person Wilbur was surprised to find he believed when they said they were glad he’s alive again. No one had openly rebuked him for his resurrection, but Wilbur thinks that might be mostly because of Tommy. No one could complain about the emotional support dead brother of a kid who had already suffered so much.

And then there was Niki.

She didn’t spend much time around the Mainlands, instead residing in a not-so-secret city underground. She was baking again.

So Tommy made the executive decision to demand and expect cheesy bread, but *only* from Niki's bakery, so Wilbur had done something harder than staring death in the face— He reached out first.

He doesn't know why he feels so fucking *nervous* it's ridiculous—

*No it isn't. It's because she is— or maybe she was, your best friend. And you hurt her.*

*Eret betrayed you. That made it hurt less to see them. You were on even ground, or something like it.*

*Jack it felt like he'd already been moving on, even just a bit, by the time you got to the elections. He was still there for the war, but for L'Manberg, not for you.*

*Fundy, ruse or not, cut you off and stayed in Manberg. He let go of you then, you knew what to expect so it hurt to see him again, but nothing you hadn't seen coming.*

*But Niki...*

*Niki never let go.*

*You did.*

The scar he had left Niki with would surely match more closely to what he had left Tommy and Tubbo with. Those three had never left him, and for that he will always be sorry.

Walking down those stone steps was far more daunting than any trek into hell— he would know— but Wilbur almost thinks whatever comes next is worth it as he gets to see Niki, flour smeared across her face, working the dough in front of her with a serene concentration. He should say something.

“Uh, hi—” Wilbur has a split second to feel embarrassed about his voice cracking as he tries to get the words out, because in the next moment there's a sword level with his throat.

“Oh my *god*— I could've killed you!” Niki lowers the sword, her surprise replaced by irritation before what him being here means catches up to her. Her expression turns cold, staring at Wilbur like she doesn't know what to make of him and certainly not like she trusts him. “I'd heard you were alive. Wasn't sure if it was worth believing it this time.” She finally puts away her sword, floured handprints now marring the hilt, as she returns to her dough like Wilbur's presence is merely an aside to her work.

“Niki...” Wilbur hesitates, swallowing thickly. He's more scared now than he had been trying to kill Dream. “I am here to...” He trails off. Niki finally turns back to look at him, an accusation in her eyes but something almost hopeful too. Wilbur recognizes it, that little gleam that he was a fool not to see back in the L'Manberg days. Niki had trusted him and therefore she had needed him. And he left her behind. “...to get some bread. Tommy asked for some bread.”

Niki turns cold again, looking at the wooden shelves along the side wall filled with fresh loaves. “What does he want?”

“The cheesy bread. The... the one with the garlic?” Wilbur doesn’t know why he phrases it as a question.

“What do you want?” Niki goes up a step ladder to the right shelf.

“What do I—?” Wilbur’s voice goes hoarse, faltering.

Niki returns to even ground, placing the bread on the brick counter between them. She looks up at him. Wilbur can’t remember if she’d always looked this fucking *strong* and he’d just been blind to it or if she’d changed that much. Who is he kidding— *everyone* he’d once known had changed so much.

“Yeah. What do you want, Wilbur? Or are you just here getting things for Tommy?” Niki asks.

“Oh! Oh— Right,” Wilbur laughs almost with a hint of panic. “How—” He clears his throat, trying to sound anything close to stable. “How are you?”

Niki gives him a look, mildly exasperated, but maybe even concerned. “Do you have anything to pay for it?”

“What?”

“For the bread.”

*To pay for the bread.* Wilbur Soot left his fucking brain in limbo, he’d come all the way over here and hadn’t brought *anything* to trade, not emeralds, not iron, not *anything*. “I...”

“Didn’t think so.” Niki doesn’t send him away, instead she nods him around the corner, opening the door back into the bakery. “Take off your coat first. It’s dirty.”

“My— Oh, right,” Wilbur tosses his coat on a row of hooks in the corridor. He stops and stares at his old cloak right beside it. He cannot begin to fathom what that means. It will surely break him. So he just joins Niki inside the bakery.

“If you help me with this, I’ll count that as payment, alright?” Niki nods to the dough on the counter. “For the love of god wash your hands first,” she gives him a sharp look as if she’d really expected him to get right to work. To be fair, Wilbur most definitely had in his frazzled mind. “Good. You remember how to need, don’t you?”

Wilbur feels like there’s a strange hum in the back of his head. “I— what?”

Niki repeats more slowly. “You remember how to knead, right?”

“Oh! Oh, right— Right, yeah, I do,” Wilbur nods quickly. It’s been over ten years, but he hasn’t forgotten. Niki’s bakery. The scent of bread.

Wilbur is quiet for a change. He doesn’t know what to do with this. With any of it. Niki is still being short with him, she isn’t exactly her usual— or *once* usual— friendly self, not that he’d expected that in any way, but the fact of the matter is, she’s being *kind*.

“Niki, I—” Wilbur doesn’t know what he’s going to say.

“You’re a liar, Wilbur Soot,” Niki says quietly, but she has him silent in an instant.

Wilbur feels the words caught in the back of his throat. He forces out a reply. She deserves reply. “Yes. I was.”

“*Was*,” Niki laughs, sharp and painful. “You don’t get to say that to me. Not yet. Or maybe ever.”

Wilbur tries again. “Yes.”

Niki isn’t looking at him.

“You didn’t care in the end. Did you?” Niki’s voice is shaky now, but she doesn’t stop.

“Not about L’Manberg, not about us— about— about *me*—”

“No,” Wilbur can’t help it. *Anything* else, but not that. Niki stops. Wilbur takes that as the expectation to continue. “I never stopped caring. About any of it— about you. But...” Ah. There’s that familiar old feeling. That last stretch dead he thought he’d stopped hating himself, but maybe sometimes it’s only fair for it to return now. “I still hurt you.”

“That’s... That’s worse. You know that’s worse, right?” Niki still isn’t looking at him and Wilbur is so fucking grateful. He doesn’t think he could survive her looking at him right now. “If you cared, and you *still*... you still did that, then— *God*, you’re the most— the most selfish person!”

“I am so sorry, Niki— I’ll go, I should never have— Shit, Niki, I am so—” Wilbur goes to grab his coat, refusing to look at the cloak beside it.

“Don’t you move, Wilbur!” Niki turns to face him sharply, eyes shining with tears and righteous fury. “You’re going to stand there and you’re going to listen for once!”

Wilbur stops, he fights tooth and nail to meet her eyes even as it feels like a knife in his chest. At the very least, she deserves this.

“I have tried *so hard* to recover from— from *you*. I didn’t sleep or-or eat and I was so alone because I *trusted* you and you left me! And don’t you dare apologize again— I can see you about to, don’t you dare!” Niki catches the words on his tongue. “Because I got better! You stayed dead, and I got better,” it’s a threat and a promise. Niki glows like the sky on fire. “And I gave up on forgiving you because you were gone. I’ve had a lot of time to think about what having you back would mean. The last time— you have no *idea* what that was like, to love you and hate you and have you back and have you die *again*. To— To see you like *that*, so much time after the sixteenth—”

Wilbur knows what she’s talking about and maybe he’s still supposed to keep his mouth shut, but the words come out whether he wants them to or not. “I saw you.”

Niki pauses, something cautious mixing with her anger. “What?”

“I saw you. Through— I could see through that... that stupid ghost sometimes. And I saw you. When they found my body again,” Wilbur stops himself. He won’t do that to her. He won’t say *I saw you mourn me*.

“You— You saw,” Niki has a war going on behind her eyes, as she struggles to factor in what this means to all the rest of it.

“I never should’ve left,” Wilbur sounds almost steady. He hopes even if she never believes in him again, she’ll at least believe this. “And I will never be able to take that back, but I...” He has nothing else to give. Apologies and wishes for things to be different are so worthless they’re cruel. “I never should have left.”

It’s like picturing a dream, but Wilbur knows he’ll never forget it. Not the sight of Niki over his body, she’s so easily lost among the crowd, but the sound of her screaming his name.

Niki nods, still unwavering, but it’s so clear she doesn’t need him anymore. “You’re back now.”

“I— Yeah?”

“And whatever you are now, whatever this is,” she still looks grim, but also so determined. Completely unyielding. The face of a woman who had shouted her fury up at a podium in the midst of a bloodied festival, without weapons or help, she had burned them. “I deserve to have my best friend back.”

“You do.”

Niki assesses him carefully, coming to some conclusion. “I hope you can be him one day.”

“Me too,” Wilbur’s voice breaks but he holds back tears. He’s not entitled to relief when he’s the one who did this.

“You’re not redeemed, you know.”

“I know. That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Right,” Niki turns back to her bakery. “You’re here for bread, right?” There’s almost a smile there. Almost.

“Right,” Wilbur feels weak. He feels alive. “For bread.”

“Then you stay,” Niki decides it. “You’ll need to do a better job than that, Wil,” she nods to the lump of dough she’d carefully begun to shape and which Wilbur had managed to ruin almost immediately.

“I will.”

~



Tommy and Wilbur try to keep busy. It isn't easy. The rain comes down in sheets and they stay in Phil's place, him now waiting out the weather at Techno's place in the arctic.

At least Tommy feels *bored*. That feels like something. Bored is better than numb or nothing.

"Phil's house is *boring*," Tommy slumps down in his chair. "Don't fucking smoke in here—you wanna do that you take that shit outside," Tommy sees Wilbur reach for his pocket and snaps at him immediately.

"I'll drown if I do that!" Wilbur huffs.

"Then don't," Tommy teases.

"Okay— Okay, then we gotta do *something* or I'm going to lose my fucking mind, man," Wilbur says irritably.

This is impressive. To the both of them. They're not fading out, they're not getting *stuck*, no matter how strong the pull may be under these conditions. Wilbur especially had been gloomy that day, emotionally drained is more like it.

"I'm putting on Cat," Tommy gets up and goes to the jukebox. It's not Phil's. Tommy has just made a habit of bringing his with him. He does, pausing as music joins the sound of rain beating against the roof. A thought comes to him, maybe a foolish one, but Tommy has always had a knack for making ridiculous plans work. "Would you want, like, a deck of cards, d'y'think, Wil?"

"What?"

"A deck of cards," Tommy repeats. "Would you want one. Bet you anything Phil's got one shoved in a drawer somewhere."

Wilbur looks frozen, his brooding replaced by something almost like stage fright. "I don't know if I..."

"Come on, you're smoking, aren't you? Might as well pick a vice that doesn't got it out for your lungs," Tommy points out.

Wilbur looks as if the very thought is something precious he doesn't want to touch.

"I'm... I'm not gonna make you. Just thought I'd..." Tommy treads more carefully. "I mean, I listen to the discs now. And that's... That's *good*. It helps. But it scared me at first too."

Wilbur stares at Phil's kitchen table, trying to burn a hole in it with a bitter look. "I only play solitaire, I mean..."

"Whoa, slow down there, eager, much? I gotta find it, first," Tommy starts clattering about Phil's house, searching chests with no reservations for privacy or niceties. "There we are! Told you— *everybody's* got a deck of cards." Tommy takes out a worn blue box, tattered and

frayed. “Though, I’ll say this one’s seen better days,” he slaps the deck down in front of him. “Come on, I’ll even let you shuffle.”

“You don’t know *how* to shuffle.”

Tommy turns red. “Yeah, like, three years ago, maybe! I could do it now, if I wanted!”

Wilbur smiles softly at that, but he stares at the box like the casket of an old friend. It’s a dangerous thing. Wilbur dreads the spiral he knows it contains for him. If he’d been allowed to bleed in limbo, his hands would’ve been raw and bloody from shuffling over and over and over and over and *over and over*— “I don’t know about this, Tommy. I don’t think you’d like competitive solitaire.”

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re not fuckin’ *playin’* solitaire,” Tommy sits down across from him, drumming his fingers on the table.

“What, then?”

Tommy ponders it for a moment. “How about go fish? I bet I can kick your ass at go fish.”

“Go fish?” Wilbur laughs.

“Uh huh. Yeah. Go fish.”

Wilbur hesitates another moment before taking the deck out of the box. The cards fit so neatly into his hands. He could do it. Make those neat familiar rows and drown in them. Instead, Wilbur deals out seven cards each.

“Right,” Tommy leans back in his chair, assessing his hand, feet kicked up on the table. He clears his throat, like he’s announcing something important. “Got any three’s?”

Wilbur smiles, looking down at his cards, the room lit only by the soft yellow overhead light and the windows left dark and overcast by a storm. For a fleeting moment Tommy has a pang of panic thinking Wilbur is about to cry. “Go fish.”

Tommy makes a fuss over it, whining and swearing as he reaches for the deck, just to make sure Wilbur keeps that smile.

They play.

## Chapter End Notes

YES. I finally beat Wilbur Soot to the punch and posted my Niki scene first!! Love her. Since cc!Wilbur has already covered Jack, Fundy, and Eret, I sort of skimmed over that and mostly explained how it went/what changed. tddd!Wilbur is doing better than c!Wilbur, so Eret was less scolding, more on even ground. Fundy never joined Las

Nevadas, Niki wasn't distracted by the Syndicate, so he remained less isolated and therefore less suicidal. Same goes for Jack, as he stayed in touch with Niki better without the Syndicate. Hope those changes make some sort of sense!

Originally I said I wanted to wait until I finished the bad ending fic to finish this one, but where I'm at now, I think I have one more chapter to go. I don't want to keep you guys waiting for me to finish the other one, but here's my warning that the ending is on the horizon.

I don't know for sure yet, but right now I'm thinking one more chapter.

I'll have a much sappier author's note when that day comes, until then, thank you all for reading <3

# Chapter 37

## Chapter Notes

Here we are. End of the road. Which means I am honor bound to be incredibly sappy.

Thank you all for this wonderful experience. To that strange wave of new readers who showed up halfway through, thank you all for a wonderful surprise. Your support was very unexpected and very cool. And to my readers who have been around since before this fic came to be— thank you for sticking around. I remember you all, and seeing you all still here is amazing. I love you guys.

I wish I had more words, but I think I spent them all writing this chapter! I kept you all waiting for over a month, but here's 13k words of a self-indulgently sappy, joyful ending. Hope that makes up for it <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Some nights Tommy will wake up screaming, feeling so clearly, so certainly, that he is there again. He never got out. Dream is still waiting just around the corner and dying will never be an escape.

Those nights are not spent alone.

Maybe there was a time where Tommy would have awoken, alone in his home and found a corner to curl into until he could stop himself from shaking, and maybe Tommy still wakes up alone, but he doesn't let himself stay that way.

It depends on the night, on the nightmare, but Tubbo and Ranboo will always wake up and open their door to him. Someone will make hot cocoa. Someone will put their arm around him. And they will both listen. Some nights Tommy stumbles to Wilbur's rough equivalent of a house in the remake of the camarvan, and there will be a fair chance that Wilbur is already awake, sitting outside, as if waiting for him.

"Ayup," Tommy announces himself, cane thudding against the wood as he emerges from the darkness, following only the orange glow of Wilbur's cigarette.

"Ayup," Wilbur replies. He puts out the cigarette on Tommy's approach. Tommy appreciates it, even if the smell lingers and sours in his nose.

Tommy sits beside him on the narrow steps up to the door, shoulder to shoulder with him without invitation. "So. I sorta thought it was like, some cosmic shit that every time I came over here you were already awake, like you knew I was coming, but just occurred to me that's fuckin' nuts. So. Do you *ever* sleep?"

“Yeah,” Wilbur says completely unconvincingly.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says scoldingly.

“Well, I must sleep *some* time,” Wilbur huffs. “And I do, really. Like. I go to bed like an hour after sunset like an old man. I just don’t... I don’t sleep heavy. So. I usually wake up a couple hours later and... sit around until it feels worth trying to go back to sleep,” Wilbur shrugs.

“That sounds bad for your health.”

Wilbur laughs. “Yeah, because if I got a solid eight hours a night I’d be in fantastic shape.”

“I mean, not as strong as *me*,” Tommy says haughtily. “But couldn’t hurt.”

“Right,” Wilbur rolls his eyes, hands fidgeting restlessly without a cigarette. He looks over at the lanterns over New L’Manberg. “I remember making those. When I was a ghost sure, but when I was younger. I guess that’s why I did it.”

“Yeah. Things were... things were looking better here. When I was exiled— When I was... taken away,” Tommy says. Tommy is still working on saying that properly. There are so many frivolous little shifts in language that change so much. Tommy was exiled, sure, but really he was *kidnapped*. Just like when people got nervous about Wilbur and said that he *left* instead of saying the truth, that he killed himself. It’s harsher, but Tommy thinks the more they call these things what they are, the less power they have to hurt them. “Not like I did much to help, but Tubbo and Ghostbur, or, you I guess, made this place a lot better. Last I saw there was a huge fucking wall around it, so. Definitely improvement.”

“Right. It’s strange, you know. I mean, I’ve said it before, the double memories, sort of, but I remember being here and... and building that crane,” Wilbur nods over to the crane hanging over the water. “And setting up the lanterns, but at the same time, I’m sort of... sort of in awe of it. Whatever I did, whatever that isolated part of me did, I think... I think Tubbo is the real reason all this made it here, you know?”

“Yeah. Tubbo was... he was real tough. About all of it,” Tommy nods. “I mean, he wasn’t alone. At least at the start, he wasn’t alone. Quackity and Fundy and even like, Phil and Ranboo. I should’ve been there for him more. I was...” Tommy glances to Wilbur. “A bit caught up in my own head.”

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur understands immediately.

Tommy waves him off. “We got through our shit in Limbo, no need to drag it back up now. But Tubbo was mourning too. And I was supposed to be his VP.”

“If I remember right, you were a pretty great VP. Not your fault shit hit the fan on your second go of it,” Wilbur shrugs.

Tommy scoffs. “Of course you’d fuckin’ say that... But you’re right. I was a pretty great VP. The best VP to ever fucking VP.” Tommy nods solemnly. “I guess Big Q can be the best

substitute VP. Definitely not gonna give his Manberg days any credit.”

Wilbur laughs, “how generous.”

“Thank you. I am very generous.”

“And humble too.”

“Obviously.”

A pause. Wilbur still feels restless without a cigarette. He knows he should stop, at least try to wean himself down to only smoking on rare bad days. It just made things easier sometimes, it was a hard thing to let go of. “So, nightmare?” This is usually how nights like these go.

Tommy nods, but doesn’t reply.

“Look, you don’t have to talk about it, man, but usually when it means you walking all the way over here it’s pretty bad,” Wilbur keeps his tone casual.

“Yeah. Well, you know.” It’s strange. When Tommy has nightmares about Limbo, he’s more inclined to go knocking on Tubbo and Ranboo’s door even if they have no way of understanding. It’s almost easier that way. That he can talk things through with them without the knowledge that they know the suffering he refers to vividly. Better than Wilbur knowing too well and getting pulled down with him. When the nightmares more heavily feature Dream, Tommy goes to find Wilbur. It’s easier than trying to describe it to Tubbo, who still feels weighted with the fact that he’s the one who let Dream take him away first, and Wilbur had been his only beacon when Dream had him, so Tommy can’t help but feel a bit safer from Dream beside him now.

“It’s alright, man. You don’t have to,” Wilbur repeats.

“Not much to say, really. You know how it goes. Dream comes back. I try to run. A-And he— I don’t—” Tommy pauses. “It fails,” Tommy decides to stop there. His subconscious has quite the repertoire of violence to draw upon in his memories. Sometimes nightmares feel a little too real.

Wilbur nods. “Yeah. I don’t remember my dreams much. But you know when it’s a nightmare and your feet get stuck to the floor? I *hate* not being able to run in dreams.”

“Yeah, but they’re never like that. Not these ones. I can run as much as I want, as hard as I can, and it doesn’t matter because... Well, the real trouble is I don’t have anywhere to run *to*. I’m always alone and... and lost. And Dream never gets tired,” Tommy sighs. “Aw, now you’ve done it. I’m talking about it,” he groans.

“Hah, you wanna talk about your feelings, Tommy?” Wilbur puts on a patronizingly endeared tone. “Aww, *Tommy*, you come to your big brother to talk about feelings? What does your heart say? Tell me.”

“Fuck off.”

Another pause, Wilbur unable to stop his worries from surfacing. “But... the nightmares are getting better? It’s been a while since you last had one.”

“Well, no. I had one a couple nights ago, just went and bothered Ranboo and Tubbo instead,” Tommy says dryly. “But... actually, before that, it’d been... I dunno. At least a week since I’d had one. That’s something, right?”

“Yeah!” Wilbur nudges him. “Progress is progress, right?”

“What about you, then? Shouldn’t you work on sleeping?” Tommy gives him a look.

“Yeah, probably,” Wilbur shrugs.

“You should ask Ponk. They offered to give me something to help me sleep. It’s mellow something,” Tommy says. “I dunno if it works. Before we knew Dream was gone, I didn’t want to take anything that was gonna make me out of it if I had to run. You know,” Tommy shrugs.

Wilbur ignores the unsettling nature of the latter half of that statement and focuses on the former. “Mellow something?”

“That’s what it’s called. ‘Cause it mellows you out I guess.”

“Melatonin, Tommy,” Wilbur smiles, unbelievably fond. “They offered you melatonin. It’s... It’s the thing our brain makes to make us sleep.”

“I fuckin’ know what melatonin is,” Tommy bursts out. “I just didn’t— I didn’t connect it, what it was.”

Wilbur makes no effort to suppress his giggles.

“What’re you laughing about, bitch?! You’re the dumbass who can’t sleep right,” Tommy snaps with little bite.

“Oh, then what’re you doing up in the middle of the night, hm?”

“Besides the point! We’re talking about *your* bullshit,” Tommy pouts. “I am *trying* to show *concern*,” Tommy says with dramatic patronization. “You just get some of that melatonin shit so you sleep better. I am telling you to.”

“Sure, for you Tommy, I will,” Wilbur is far too genuine in his endearment. “You know, I’m really glad you come over. That you feel like you can do that, like, after nightmares. That you can talk to me about... about things, all this,” Wilbur gestures vaguely to the air.

“Yeah, well, we’re supposed to talk about this shit, remember?” Tommy almost doesn’t know what to do with Wilbur’s thoughtfulness.

“Yeah, that,” Wilbur scoffs. He raises the unlit cigarette out of habit before irritatedly putting it back down.

“D’you wanna play cards?” Tommy notices. He always does.

“Bit late for cards,” Wilbur gives him a look.

“Yeah. Bit late for a lot of things,” Tommy shrugs.

“Yeah. I don’t want to...” Wilbur grimaces. “I don’t want to fall back on the cards. Like, for you the discs were something to you when you were alive as well. I didn’t give a shit about cards until Limbo and I don’t want them to... it might sound weird, but I don’t want them to mean something to me.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, no, I *like* playing cards with you, Tommy,” Wilbur says quickly. “But what I like about it is just *doing* something with you. The cards aren’t the part that matters and that’s— that’s *better*, right?”

Tommy nods. “Yeah. I think I know what you mean. I do think... I think I still need the discs in a way. Not like I did before, but I need to know I can still get to them if I want them. Dunno how *healthy* that is or whatever, but... I dunno,” Tommy mutters. “Better than it was.”

“Yeah. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with using a crutch. I mean, look at me,” Wilbur nods at his unlit cigarette.

“Hah,” Tommy says dryly, tapping his cane on the stone steps. “A crutch.”

A pause, Tommy continuing more carefully, “sometimes I still don’t feel like this is real.”

To an onlooker the thoughts might’ve seem disconnected, games and vices and crutches and questions of reality, but Wilbur followed Tommy’s train of thought exactly. They cling to these things because they need something grounding. “Yeah? Like what?”

“You know,” Tommy nods in the general direction of nothing. “Most of it. All of it. Being here. Being free. Like, sometimes if I think about it too long, I get half convinced this is all a dream or Limbo or something. And one of these days I’m gonna hear his stupid fucking voice say *wake up* and I’m back in a fucking cell.”

Wilbur nods, understanding. “Oh, yeah, I get you there. Like, I know logically Limbo never had dreams or hallucinations to escape into, unless the vague Ghostbur bits count for anything, but sometimes I think this must be some happy illusion. I try to logic my way out of it, Limbo always being brutally honest was one of its key features, but it doesn’t always beat back the paranoia.”

“Fair. I mean, Limbo not having illusions and shit, that doesn’t really cover my bases. Wouldn’t put it past Dream to do some shady magic shit that makes me hallucinate,” Tommy says bitterly.

“Well, I’m quite sure that I’m real, so if that’s true, we’re in the same illusion together, right?” Wilbur says.



“How’re you so sure *I’m* real, then?”

“Not exactly a comforting thing to say to an undead, paranoid wreck, you know,” Wilbur gives him a look, amused and maybe a bit concerned.

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I am real, by the way. Sometimes I sort of drift and I’m not totally sure that’s true, but generally speaking,” Tommy knocks on his own head. “Ow. But see? 3D and everything.” Tommy reaches out toward Wilbur’s face to prove his point.

“Oy, get your grubby hands off of me,” Wilbur bats him away.

Tommy nods, satisfied. “Well, there you go. We’re both real. So if it turns out all this shit really is still with Dream or in Limbo, we’re not alone, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Wilbur humors him.

“*And* if somehow it turned out you were still in Limbo alone, I’d never stop until I got you back. Or it would mean I was still with Dream so I’d see you sometimes, right?”

Wilbur nods, taking that one a bit more personally, he goes to reply, before stopping himself. He doesn’t know how to cope with Tommy’s loyalty. Maybe a bit more easily after everything, but it’s still strange. Wilbur goes with the easiest reply. “Thanks, Tommy.”

“For what?”

“Not giving up,” Wilbur is so tender.

Tommy feels as if the air had been pulled from his lungs. “But I did give up,” he says with the intonation of someone whose ribs were being constricted. “I was gonna bury you. After I knew Dream was gone- I hinged all my fucking hope on what that evil, stupid dickhead could do for me. I *did* give up, Wil. Don’t put that kind of faith on me.”

Wilbur doesn’t take it back, he doesn’t even argue, he just looks at him with a quiet sort of pity. “Say what you like, Tommy. You never gave up.”

“But I *did*, I fucking told you I did-“

“You said you were gonna bury me.”

“I- What?”

“You were going to give me a grave.”

Tommy stares at him, like he doesn’t know what to make of him. “Yeah. Yeah, ‘course we were.”

“Not *of course* you were. I didn’t get a grave last time, Tommy,” Wilbur says with this slow, intent certainty Tommy finds difficult to challenge. “You were still gonna take care of me. Only way left. That’s what normally happens when someone dies. When resurrection isn’t

an option, because it shouldn't be an option, that's how you take care of the dead. That is not you giving up on me, Tommy. I know you'd never do that. You were going to keep living."

Tommy laughs a little weakly, "was I?"

Wilbur shrugs, "that's more your area of expertise, but in those last months of Limbo, I never felt you growing closer. Not after that last time."

"Oh. Cool."

"Cool?" Wilbur gives him a look, eyebrows raised.

"What d'you want me to say to your magic death sensing powers from beyond the grave?" Tommy says with sarcastic melodrama.

"Right, fair," Wilbur laughs. "You might want to turn in soon. I'll probably try to get some sleep too. Promise."

Tommy nods, but he doesn't move.

"I also don't mind staying up," Wilbur continues. "Pretty sure I've got insomnia at this point."

Tommy gives him a reproachful look. "*You* said you were sleeping sometimes."

"Yeah. *Sometimes*," Wilbur teases. "Go on, then. What's banging around that empty skull of yours?"

"Oy!" Tommy pouts. "I'm a fucking *genius* and you know it!"

"Hmm I think genius might be a stretch," Wilbur says with the air of a big brother who knows just the right buttons to press.

"Oh yeah, sure. Mr. Big Brains over here doesn't even know how to sleep. Psh," Tommy scoffs.

"I mean, I do know how to sleep."

"Oh yeah, then why aren't you?"

Wilbur grins, "I actually don't have a counter point to that one. Maybe you're right. I just don't know how to sleep."

"Of course I'm right. I'm Tommyinnit, I'm *always* right."

"And humble too."

"We already did this bit. *Yeah*, and humble too," Tommy says patronizingly, like Wilbur is being stupid.

Wilbur laughs. Tommy fucking loves it when he makes Wilbur laugh like that.

“So, you wanna tell me why *you* aren’t sleeping then, oh wise Tommyinnit, genius of all things?” Wilbur says teasingly.

Tommy frowns. “Aw, why’d you have to ruin it and go back to the *boring* stuff?” He whines.

“Does boring just mean something you don’t want to talk about?”

“Obviously. Why would I wanna talk about something boring?” Tommy rolls his eyes.

Wilbur gives him another moment to continue on his own. Then he pushes. “Is it the nightmare? Still haven’t quite gotten rid of the cobwebs?”

Tommy’s gloom grows more blatant, shoulders hunched inward. “Yeah, cobwebs. He is like a little fuckin’ spider, inne? Just crawlin’ around in the corner so I can’t shake him out...”

Wilbur’s amusement fades. “Still feels like that, does it? That stuck?”

“Well,” Tommy grimaces, mulling it over. “Kind of? And also not? Some days I don’t think about him at all. But like. Objectively, Dream still scares me *and* I know he’s never gonna hurt me again. And those two things don’t somehow cancel out. But... maybe that’s okay. Because I *do* know Dream can’t hurt me, and me remembering the fear, I like that better to thinking Dream was my friend and shit. And I like that I *can* like something better and have it go my way, yeah?”

Wilbur nods. “I guess that makes sense. I remember getting caught up in the details in Limbo in a sort of similar way. Not the friend part, but the... the thinking it was something it wasn’t? Just trying to figure out why I was like that. Why being dead was like that.”

“Ever find any answers?”

Wilbur laughs bitterly. “*No.*” A pause. Wilbur has a question he doesn’t know if he should ask. “Now, I know his logic means absolutely nothing. It’s not justifiable or logical or anything near fucking human, but...”

“What?” Tommy pushes when Wilbur’s rambling trails off.

“Do you ever think about why *he* did it?”

Tommy goes quiet and Wilbur immediately regrets it.

“Fuck, I knew I shouldn’t have, I dunno why I asked anyway—”

“No, it’s... it’s a fair question,” Tommy says maybe too mildly. “I’ve thought about it, obviously. Somewhat then, but not really. Back then it was more of the same shit, ‘it’s probably my fault I should just keep my head down bla bla this is probably what’s best, bullshit, bullshit, bullshit,’ you know,” Tommy waves it off dismissively. “And now that I *know* that’s all bullshit, I guess...” Tommy knows this isn’t the answer that will make Wilbur feel better, but Tommy doesn’t really care. “Tubbo thinks— and, well. He’s probably right. Dream said he wanted to be immortal. Tubbo thinks he...” Tommy stops and Wilbur notes

he doesn't actually look upset, rather just disapproving. "Must've done it for fun," Tommy shrugs.

Wilbur yet again thinks he really shouldn't have fucking asked. "Fucking christ, man, I am—"

"If you say you're sorry I'm gonna punt you into the sun."

"S-so... uh. Okay, I don't have a smooth recovery from that one," Wilbur's shoulders hunch inward, a hand rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Yeah," Tommy scoffs. "Well, since you have asked. I also think... it's better, that there wasn't some grand reason. For Dream or cosmically or whatever the fuck. I don't think anything could've justified what he did, but... I'm glad there's nothing to try, yeah? Like, no one's trying to put a bow around my trauma so it's wrapped up all neat and other people can pretend that makes it manageable when *I'm* the one whose finger gets caught in the ribbon."

"You— what?"

"You know," Tommy gestures to his one good index finger. "When you... when you tie a bow and shit and you accidentally tie your finger in it."

"...Right," Wilbur pretends he follows.

"And, I know this— Okay, this isn't me justifying shit, so, don't try to fucking therapize me," Tommy says warningly. "But if I have to ask myself what it was what for and shit, well. I'm glad I got to keep you," Tommy leaves no room for argument, eyebrows furrowed together, somehow looking so much older and also exactly his age.

"Tommy..."

"Don't you try it, man. I'm serious. This isn't me finding a fucking silver lining or some shit. Nothing about it was good for me. For either of us, but— *but*, if it weren't for all of this horrible— *horrible* shit, you'd still be dead. So. Maybe by a fucking fluke, it cleaned up your..." Now Tommy falters, unsure of how to put it. *Your mess* just seems cruel.

"My mistake," Wilbur finishes for him, so sure and understanding it's almost like another apology. This one Tommy won't protest. Wilbur sighs, leaning back against the cool stone steps, not caring as it digs into his back. "I'll... I'll let that all fall into place, okay? It was a mistake. And this somehow undid that mistake. And that doesn't justify what happened to you, but..." Wilbur looks at Tommy, dark eyes with something like a storm stirring behind them, but it's not the kind of storm that leaves Tommy fearing a lightning strike. "If you want me here, I should be here."

Tommy smiles, calmed and maybe a little proud. "Good."

Wilbur hesitates, mulling something over in his head, he sits up again, elbows resting on his knees. "Okay. This is... probably not constructive, but I keep on getting caught up thinking... well, okay. First off, me being here at all, getting the chance to live again feels like something lucky. So it feels a bit shit to complain, and stop me if me roping you into this

isn't fair, but," Wilbur pauses, still staring out at New L'Manberg. "We're never going to get properly all the way better."

"Real genius, you are," Tommy says dryly.

"I know, I know, stating the obvious," Wilbur brushes him off.

"No, no, well, I mean, yeah, but really half-assing it is what you're doing," Tommy says scoldingly. "You think I haven't had the same fucking stupid thought forever now? Nah. You're right, we are never going to be properly all the way better. Not gonna be who we were before. Think that bit is pretty typical, though. I mean, you're not still a *baby*."

Tommy points out. He sighs, but without weight, rather put at ease. "But as for us, I'd argue we're never going to *stop* getting better, eh? And when we slide backwards and shit gets rough, that's just more getting better-ing that we've got to get doing."

Not for the first time, nor will it be the last time, Tommy has stumped him with something so simply and genuinely profound. Wilbur stares at him and Tommy doesn't know what to do with his brother looking so amazed.

"What?" Tommy says defensively.

"When'd you get to be such an optimist?"

"Um, fucking always?" Tommy scoffs. "You think I could've survived all this shit, any of it, if I weren't an optimist?"

"Guess not," Wilbur is still staring at him. Maybe he should've known better. Tommy has never given up before. "You've grown."

Tommy stares back, unwavering. So much weight behind two simple words. "That's what happens when you keep living."

Wilbur expects this, finally breaking away and looking back into the dark. He'd been prepared for something painful; why else would he have said it again?

Tommy continues, "so have you."

"What?" Wilbur looks back at him, his first thought being he's misunderstood, but of course he hasn't. His expression softens and that instinctive bitterness Wilbur has fought so hard against is washed away by Tommy so easily.

"Come on, don't look at me like I just asked you to the fucking ball, I mean it," Tommy breaks the tension in that typical way of his. "I mean it. *So have you.*" Unspoken, *because you kept living.*

"I can try not to be sappy, but..." Wilbur makes a decision. Not an easy one, but it comes to him as naturally as breathing. He decides to believe him. "I'm glad I've grown."

Tommy smiles, proud of them both. "Yeah, me too."

It's cooler out the deeper the night has wore on. It's nice. Helps Tommy clear his head a bit. This close to New L'Manberg's lanterns he can't really make out many stars, but the view is pretty either way.

"You know, not gonna lie, New L'Manberg is probably prettier than the OG," Tommy admits.

"Really?" Wilbur glances at him, surprised. "Even with the crater?"

"Yeah, actually. Maybe it's prettier because we had to make more of it. To make up for the," Tommy gestures in the general direction of the crater, whose waters glisten in the light of the lanterns, but their depths remain dark. In the day it will look far more alive, but for now it's just a reflection of what they've built above it.

"I'm proud of you all. For doing this. I should tell Tubbo that too," Wilbur says, looking back to the wooden houses, the city on stilts. "You all made something new. And... okay, I stand by what I said on the 16th."

"What?" Tommy is puzzled, giving him a worried look.

"Bear with me here," Wilbur knocks shoulders with him gently. "I said L'Manberg could never be what it once was. That I think is still true. But in other ways, you and Tubbo and all the rest beautifully proved me wrong. The world is *not* better off without L'Manberg. In some form."

Tommy feels a warmth growing brighter in his chest. He hadn't realized he needed to hear Wilbur say that until he said it. "Just like the world isn't better off without *you*. Right?"

Wilbur laughs softly, eyes already shining. He'd just barely kept it together so far, and here Tommy goes and makes it impossible for him to hate himself. Not on a night like this. *I've grown*. The thought persists, not a fire burning in his chest, it's a relief, the calm after the storm. "Don't say that, I'll cry."

"Then cry, bitch. I won't take it back," Tommy teases him. "And come on, it makes sense. L'Manberg didn't stay dead and neither did we. Might be *too* good a metaphor, actually," Tommy sighs, almost wistful. "Never gonna be the same, but still here. Just... on stilts," Tommy taps his cane on the stairs again, both to emphasize his point and just something to do with that restlessness still ill contained inside of him.

"We should try to get some sleep," Wilbur stands, stretching until his bones crack loud enough to make Tommy wince.

"Yeah," Tommy stands as well. He pauses, staring toward the prime path, but he doesn't leave.

"You wanna crash here tonight?" Wilbur says before he can walk away.

"In your little shithole? Where?" Tommy tries to stay aloof, but he hasn't said no.

Wilbur shrugs. "You take the bed. I'm a big boy, I can sleep on the floor for one night."

“Old man, more like it,” Tommy scoffs, but he follows Wilbur into the camarvan. “I don’t think your bones can take it. I can take the floor. Not like it’s obsidian.”

“No, no you don’t do that, especially not saying ominous stuff like that. *You* let me be the super generous and cool big brother and take the bed,” Wilbur tries to be stubborn. He’s lost his touch.

Tommy gives him a look before dragging Wilbur’s mattress off the wooden frame and onto the floor. Wilbur stares, far too tired for this and baffled. “So. Who’s sleeping on the floor now?”

“We both are, dipshit. We’ll lay on it on the short side, so. Our legs will be on the floor, I guess, but it’s *fair*,” Tommy is far too proud of himself.

“Right. So neither of us sleep well.”

“We don’t sleep well already,” Tommy says pointedly.

“Fine. Now shut up and go to sleep,” Wilbur doesn’t even bother taking off his coat or grabbing a blanket.

“You’re like a fucking animal. Do you ever change out of that coat?” Tommy rolls his eyes, laying down across from him.

“Shush. Sleep,” Wilbur mutters.

Tommy doesn’t sleep just yet, he finally gets settled, but a slow dawning thought takes up space instead of rest. Tommy stares at the roof of the camarvan. At the blue tinted skylight. It really is a perfect copy.

“You... you remember this, yeah?” Tommy says a little hoarsely now.

“What’re you talking about, man?” Wilbur groans, burying his face in his pillow.

Tommy reaches out and hits Wilbur’s arm. “You know. But... we’d only sleep in here when it rained because it got too crowded.”

Wilbur rolls over, following his gaze to the skylight. He understands.

“The table was in the middle then.”

“Yeah. Yeah, me and Tubbo were squished between the table and the counters with the brewing stands on...” Tommy lifts his head up, “on that side, right? And you always slept up front. And... and...” Tommy sits up now. “Eret slept by the back wall. And Fundy took the other side. And... I guess me and Tubbo didn’t need to sleep next to each other, one of us could’ve gone up on the other side of the table, but we... I dunno, we didn’t,” Tommy flops back down. “By the time... after the war when we had Niki and Jack we also had more places to stay, so. We didn’t get that with them so much. But... you know. You remember,” Tommy almost says it like a question.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” Wilbur says quietly. He remembers sitting in the front seat, and that early he did sleep some, instead of staying awake wondering how they would all survive. Before the war really began, when he was still radiant with hope.

“That was good,” Tommy says. It’s so simple, those three words, but Wilbur feels the weight of them, a gentle ache in his chest.

“Yeah, it was.”

Tommy smiles softly, he knows he’s changed and so has everything else, but at least he can still look up at that skylight, and remember looking at those same stars. Nostalgia is a kindness again, even if it cannot be untied fully from grief. He knows Wilbur is still staring at him, understanding him even.

“Go to sleep, man,” Tommy rolls over away from him.

They sleep until after dawn. Tommy doesn’t have another nightmare.

~

Tubbo and Ranboo go by Tommy’s house near noon, but he isn’t there.

“Huh,” Ranboo shrugs. “Maybe he went on ahead?”

“Yeah, probably.” Tubbo feels a quiet undercurrent of relief, barely a thing of note, that Tommy not being where he’s expected to be is no longer a thing of terror, and instead a wonderfully meaningless one.

They’re approaching New L’Manberg still without sign of Tommy, but Wilbur is awake, sitting outside the Camarvan.

“Hey, Wilbur– you seen Tommy?” Tubbo calls ahead.

“Yep,” Wilbur jabs his thumb over his shoulder back toward his home. “That kid could sleep for a week, I swear.”

“He slept over here?” Ranboo asks.

“Nightmare?” Tubbo cuts in.

“Yeah, you know how it is. Slept better once he got here, though. Do you want me to grab him?” Wilbur stands, stretching, his knees cracking.

“Nah, we’ve got him,” Tubbo steps up, pushing past Wilbur and into his home like he owns the place, Ranboo following a bit more apologetically. Tommy is barely on the mattress laid out on the floor, his head hanging off of it, mouth open as he sleeps. He’s back to his old ways, Tubbo notes. A blanket hog taking up as much room as possible. Perfect. “Tommy?” Tubbo announces himself first, before gently nudging Tommy’s shoulder. He knows how this goes by now, he has to announce himself first, and Tommy might still jump and you do *not* under any circumstances say *wake up*. A muffled noise of discontent comes from



underneath the blankets, Tommy's half visible face scowling, eyes shut tight. "Come on, bossman, you've already slept half the day away."

A hand emerges only to halfheartedly swat Tubbo away like an annoying fly. Tubbo steps back before Tommy can accidentally slap him.

"It would be too mean to take him down to the docks and throw him in, yeah?" Tubbo whispers.

"Uh. Yes. Unless your goal is to actually terrorize him," Ranboo replies dryly.

"Hm. Maybe not terrorize. Just annoy," Tubbo says thoughtfully. Tubbo thinks over the odds of Tommy swinging a knife at them if he's startled. They're relatively high, but the odds of Tommy actually stabbing one of them are a bit lower.

Tubbo has a water bucket.

"You're not gonna..?" Ranboo is more reluctant.

"No, I'm not gonna dump it on him," Tubbo whispers back. "Just..." Tubbo gets his hand wet, stepping up beside Tommy, flicking off the water onto his face.

Tommy makes a noise somewhere between confusion and outrage, sitting up sharply and almost smacking his head against Tubbo's.

"Did you just *spit* on me?!" Tommy shouts.

"No! No, I did not!" Tubbo is torn between defending himself and laughing.

"No— No you just spit on me! My face is all wet— fucking gross, man!" Tommy whines.

"It's *water*, Tommy! It's just *water*," Tubbo's efforts to bury a laugh grow weaker.

"You're *laughing*? You laughing at *me*?" Tommy tackles Tubbo, the bucket of water flooding Wilbur's home.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Tubbo wheezes without an ounce of guilt.

"Come on, guys, just— oh no—" Ranboo jumps up onto the counter before the water can reach him. This was supposed to be a *relaxing* day where he wouldn't need armor.

"What the fuck are you all doing to my house?" Wilbur ducks back inside. He stares forlornly at the now drenched mattress on the floor. "Oh. Oh this *sucks*. Look— Look, you guys got the Enderman up on the counter like a fucking cat— you *ruined* my bed, so how about you all take this outside?"

Tommy and Tubbo stop, limbs tangled together, Tubbo with Tommy half in a headlock and Tommy *definitely* about to bite down on Tubbo's arm.

“Actually, Tubs, could you– Not around my neck, don’t– don’t–” Tommy feels a flicker of panic, tapping against Tubbo’s arm rapidly, who immediately lets go. “J-Just not trapped– I can’t–”

“Oh, yeah, no problem, Tommy.”

Tommy calms easily enough, the two of them still falling over each other on Wilbur’s now soaked floors.

“Fucking christ– Just– Just–” Wilbur sighs. “Drag this shit out into the sun so maybe I’ll get some actual sleep tonight, yeah?”

They exchange a look, staring from Ranboo crouched on the counter very *much* like a cat to each other and their soaked clothes. They collapse into giggly hysterics for reasons somehow only known between the two of them.

Wilbur scowls. “I’m never letting you stay over again.”

“Aw, you don’t *mean* it,” Tommy scrambles to his feet. “Come on, Wilby–”

“*Wilby!*” Wilbur’s irritation sharply becomes vicious delight. “You did it!”

“What?! What, no– No, I didn’t–”

“You called me Wilby again! You did!” Wilbur cackles.

“I did not!” Tommy chases him outside.

“It was a puddle, Ranboo. You’re wearing flipflops. You would’ve been fine,” Tubbo teases him.

“I would *not*, flipflops are barely shoes!” Ranboo pouts.

“Do you want me to carry you safely away from the terrible flood, Ranboo,” Tubbo says with mocking sympathy.

“As if you *could*,” Ranboo scoffs.

Tubbo gives a look of perfectly calm innocence.

“You...” Ranboo stares at him. “Whoa– Hold on– waitwaitwait– put me down, *oh my god, put me down!*”

“Nope! Not until you’re safe and *far away* from the water. You’re not getting hurt on my watch!” Tubbo says smartly, Ranboo helplessly thrown over his shoulder and so tall it’s a miracle they haven’t both fallen over.

“Okay, okay, we’re outside, we’re away from the water, you can put me down–”

“But surely we should get to higher ground first! The ground could be damp!”

“Oh, you are sooo gonna pay for this,” Ranboo grumbles.

“Am I really?”

“Yep,” and with that, Ranboo makes sure they both fall over, throwing his weight to the side and taking Tubbo down with him.

“Ow,” Tubbo lies flat on his back. “You’re so mean.”

“*I’m* mean!” Ranboo laughs, clambering off the ground.

“Yeah. So mean,” Tubbo lays an arm across his eyes, full of self pity.

“What’d you do to Tubbo?” Tommy stops his efforts, throwing Wilbur’s mattress onto the grass.

“Just on the ground?!” Wilbur blusters.

“Where the fuck do you want it, then?!” Tommy shouts back.

“On the– On the wood or something, not in the mud!” Wilbur snaps, grabbing the mattress, hauling it much more pathetically onto the wooden platforms.

“Quit your nagging old man, we’ve got important shit to do,” Tommy leaves him. “Come on, Tubbo, you’re not tired already, are you?” He grabs Tubbo’s arm and tugs him off the ground. Now they head toward their original destination over the hill.

They take off shoes and socks and Tommy lays his still bloodstained green bandana beside Tubbo’s faded and frayed red one and Ranboo stays fully clothed, albeit not in armor, intending on getting some sun and reading or some other boring shit that Tommy has no interest in, if not he’ll go bother Wilbur or Phil or something. Ranboo is definitely not suited for Tommy and Tubbo’s plans for the day. The three of them stroll down the dock and Tubbo and Tommy both keep Ranboo between them so he isn’t anywhere near the edge of the water.

Tommy had agreed to this. They were in the height of summer heat now and at the time it had sounded like a good idea. The water in the crater underneath New L’Manberg was too still, it was more occupied by fish, but out in the cove around the docks the water is clear and cool, stirred by waves.

The thing is, in recent memory Tommy hasn’t had the best time swimming. Especially not in salt water. If he thinks about it too hard, he can already taste it, the burn, the weight of it filling his throat when all he wants is air.

He’s had happy memories swimming too. One’s that he can recall untainted, because it hadn’t been salt water. It had been rivers and lakes and easy days, their L’Manberg coats left to dry on a rock as Tommy and Tubbo tried to get Fundy to join them.

It all comes back to the salt.

“You know, we don’t have to jump in. We can go around the pier, to the sand, you know,” Tubbo sees him staring over the edge, transfixed, and he tries.

“Okay, bitch, feel free. Don’t forget a fuckin’ pool noodle too,” Tommy says haughtily.

“Oh yeah? Jump in, then,” Tubbo teases him.

“From *here*?” Tommy scoffs. “Nah— I’m jumping off from the top *and* I’ll beat you there,” Tommy pushes him lightly, just enough to make Tubbo yelp as he teeters a bit closer to the edge, but by then Tommy is sprinting toward the wooden platforms built up over the water. He doesn’t notice that his leg doesn’t hurt, and that is its own victory. The absence of pain is no longer a surprise. He still has his bad days, it requires constant maintenance with physical therapy or his progress just disappears, and long trips he keeps his cane close, but he no longer expects it to always hurt. That’s more than enough.

He can hear Tubbo right behind him and now the sound of footsteps at his heels does not send sparks of terror through him. He knows Tubbo’s footsteps as well as his own. Tommy stops sharply, three storeys up, the sky is so big and so blue and it touches the water so easily there is only a thin line between above and below and it’s all so *big*, but Tommy isn’t scared of it. He looks down. The waves are gentle, still, it’s quite the drop.

“Look,” Tubbo pants, catching his breath. “I’ll jump if you do.”

“Yeah?” Tommy doesn’t look at him, only straight down at the sea.

“Yeah.”

Tommy can’t bury a smirk, crooked delight overtaking him for reasons he can’t quite name. “Countdown?”

“Ten,” Tubbo steps up beside him, their shoulders touching. “Nine.” Tommy steps up even closer to the edge, his toes over open air before he steps back again. Not yet. “Eight.” Tubbo sounds a little nervous. Tommy doesn’t tease him for it. “Seven.” Tommy feels like there’s just a spark of lightning inside of him, he is remembering when a touch of adrenaline meant *fun*. “Six.” He’s ready. “Five.” Tommy isn’t wearing his goggles, and the sun is still too bright, but he’ll manage knowing he can block it out if needed. “Five— Wait, fuck—”

Tommy laughs, barking and sharp. “Four, Tubso.”

“Right,” Tubbo laughs, a giggle almost under his breath. Tommy glances up from the water over at him. Tubbo is young. He is eighteen years old. He looks it too, scars and all. Tommy must look seventeen, scars and all. Tommy is seventeen years old and the days will pass as days and nothing more until he will turn eighteen, and then he’ll keep going. Time is no longer something that can be stolen or pulled apart or bottled. He’s quite alright with that. “Three, two, one.”

Tommy doesn’t hesitate when he steps off this ledge, and maybe it was naive of him not to realize the parallels he was drawing, but the comparison feels so feeble now. Falling doesn’t feel like dying anymore. Tommy is in freefall, he shouts his joy into the wind tugging past

and the water rushes up to meet him, catching him none too gently, the bottom of his feet sting and the taste of salt is overwhelming, he's sinking through the water and this pace is familiar, this sluggish gravity hints at limbo but any comparison stops there. Here there is still dappled sunlight pressing against his closed eyes and there's water annoyingly in his nose and it's not *silent*. Not silent by a longshot with the easy current stirring against his skin, just like it isn't empty. Tommy is back in a beautifully mortal sea, but he doesn't drown. He breaks the surface and breathes.

He's with Tubbo again and it's summer. Tommy feels alive.

~

Wilbur still has a hard time knowing what to do with himself, especially when he can't follow Tommy around. And without Tommy around to tell him off, he *does* end up smoking more when he's alone.

Although, he's not always alone.

"Light?" Quackity, at least to Wilbur's often distracted mind, seemed to almost appear beside him.

"W-What?" Wilbur stares at him.

Quackity raises an eyebrow, taking the unlit cigarette out of his mouth, glancing to Wilbur's own lit one. "I uh, I was wondering if I could borrow a light?"

"A-? Oh! Oh, yeah," Wilbur fumbles in his coat pocket.

Quackity still looks curiously amused as Wilbur lights the cigarette. "Still wearing that thing, are you?" He says as Wilbur shoves the lighter back in his coat pocket.

"What?"

"That coat, man. It was kinda gross before the... everything that happened after Pogtopia, and now..." Quackity grimaces sympathetically. "Could use a wardrobe change," he turns half away, looking over New L'Manberg.

Wilbur's current favorite smoking spot is up on the hillside, in the shade perhaps too close to Ghostbur's sewers. Wilbur hasn't gone back there— or, he supposes, in this state of being, in this living body, gone to the sewer for the first time. But there's something peaceful about being up here. He can look out over New L'Manberg in its entirety. Things have changed so much around here that Wilbur almost forgets not too far from here is where he first tried to end things. *Tried*. It no longer counts as a successful attempt, not really in the long run. Good.

This coat still has a hole in the back. The exit wound of a sword outlined in tatters.

"Yeah. I probably should," Wilbur admits. The coat is comforting, somehow. It's heavy, the material soft from being so heavily worn, but stiff and sturdy in ways that, if Wilbur really

thinks about it, probably has to do with how disgusting the coat probably is from old blood and dirt. “I like having all the pockets,” is the feeble excuse Wilbur settles on.

Quackity laughs in that dry, charming way of his. “You can get another coat with pockets.”

“Touché.”

They haven’t really talked since Wilbur became alive again. Wilbur knows he must have at least *seen* Quackity in all that time, the guy has hung around often enough, kept New L’Manberg together. Although, New L’Manberg hardly needed a leader, or even a government, when everyone who had tried to destroy them was either gone or had grown up, Quackity and Sapnap being prime examples, but he still seemed to want to check in.

Wilbur attempts to catch up. “How are Karl and Sapnap?”

“Good, you know, they’re good,” Quackity says with a temperamental level of authenticity, nodding. Quackity gestures with his cigarette vaguely. “Sapnap...” He takes a drag, exhaling too heavily, Wilbur waits while he clears his throat. “He’s still kinda... trying to make sense of it all. In a way, we all are. But especially for him. I mean, he was his best friend. Feels like a lifetime ago, but I guess not for him. And it’s not like he’s conflicted or some shit, it’s just, he thought he knew him and he turned out to be a fucking monster. That takes some processing,” Quackity shrugs, Wilbur hums in agreement. “And Karl is...” Quackity trails off, clearly lost in a deep thought that Wilbur is not necessarily privy to. “He’s got us both a little worried, but we’re all trying to figure it out together.” A weighted pause, Quackity returning to some old conviction kept close to his chest. “We’re making it up as we go, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Wilbur follows his gaze back out to his former city-state. From here, he can’t see them, but he knows Tommy and Tubbo are just over the hillside. Ranboo has returned to the main platforms of New L’Manberg and is chatting with Phil. “I think that’s all any of us are doing, really.”

“Yeah,” Quackity agrees, still musing. “Just a couple of fuck ups doing our best, right?” He sighs, not bitterly, but almost content.

It’s been a long time. For Wilbur, at least, it’s been a long time, but he hasn’t forgotten everything. He and Quackity, they’d understood each other in a particularly ugly, vicious way. And it looks like they’ve both pushed past that ugliness, but Wilbur knows, at least for himself, some parts of that stayed and will probably always stay.

“So, do you talk to them? To Karl and Sapnap.”

“Talk to them? I mean, obviously. What’d you mean?” Quackity is cautious in an instant, sensing Wilbur’s shift to something a little past smalltalk, and Wilbur knows if he wants anything from the man he’ll have to show some weakness and offer up part of himself first.

“I mean, I’ve tried. I’ve talked some. With my own family, you know, Tommy, Phil, all them,” Wilbur talks like he’s pulling teeth, he would know. “It’s hard. You said it, we’re both fuck ups, and at least for me, that means the... the shitty things I’ve done, yeah?”

And..." Wilbur doesn't know how he's doing this. Being vulnerable in his first chat with former-friend, former-rival, former- *something*, Quackity HQ. "Even dead, I couldn't bring myself to tell Tommy how fucked up I was. Even when it was pretty clear Tommy already knew. But I'm trying, yeah? And... I think you might understand some of that."

Quackity looks genuinely surprised, even startled. "Y-Yeah, I... I think I know what you mean." This is different from miserably rubbing elbows with dry sarcasm about whatever is wrong with the two of them. Quackity knew Wilbur came back different, but this was... well, Quackity had admired Wilbur a long time ago for reasons as far from this as they could get, but maybe for a moment, maybe for longer than a moment, Quackity admires Wilbur again, for something Quackity is only just learning to appreciate himself. Wilbur is *trying*. And yes, they'd just been over that, they're fucked up *and* they're making it up as they go, but it's not just for their families. Wilbur is trying for *himself* as well.

Maybe Quackity should elaborate, explain his own side of whatever this is, but instead he just stares over the hillside and says a soft, "huh," of understanding.

Quackity is hard for Wilbur to read now. He doesn't remember him being this way, then again, maybe Wilbur had been younger and more inclined to make assumptions than actually try to figure out what Quackity was thinking. Quackity has grown too, and is more inclined to *tell* him what he's thinking, and to give Wilbur something kind enough to take his breath away again. "You know, I think it's really good you're back. That's probably... a kinda redundant thing to say," he laughs, half under his breath, still not looking at him, like he hasn't just handed Wilbur something precious. "And I dunno if they still *need* us, if you know what I mean, but I think they should still *have* us, you know?"

Maybe Wilbur shouldn't be able to follow such a vague train of thought, but he does. He isn't sure how he's going to manage Quackity being happy to have him back, so he'll deal with what he can manage.

"Thank you," Wilbur says.

Now Quackity looks at him, puzzled. "For what?"

"For taking care of them," Wilbur explains, soft and almost apologetic. He doesn't know if there are the words to properly tell Quackity how grateful he is. "I was gone, and- and you took care of them."

Quackity almost winces. "Maybe don't thank me, alright? Did a pretty shit job of it, though, considering."

"I don't give a shit how good you were at it. You were *there*, weren't you?" Wilbur says more fiercely now, and with it, unspoken, *and I wasn't*.

Yet again, Quackity knows exactly what's unsaid, on whatever peculiar shared wavelength they've always had over the years, staring at Wilbur with wide eyes. The pause extends, heavy between them. Quackity breaks the stare. He nods. "Yeah. Well, if that's all it takes to make the grade nowadays, you're here *now*. Thanks for coming back," he smirks, like they share an inside joke.

Wilbur laughs even if he doesn't quite know why. "Any time."

They both know they shouldn't, but they keep smoking, and maybe it's a little less pathetic with company.

~

Tommy had forgotten that exhaustion could be peaceful. Late afternoon, they've left the water behind, instead finding a place in the sun in New L'Manberg to sit wrapped up in towels.

"I've been thinking of some shit," is how Tommy begins.

"Good for you, man. That sounds hard," Tubbo teases him.

"Fuck off," Tommy's retort is almost instinctive nowadays. He continues, "I've been thinking about doing something."

"Okay, that's terrifyingly vague," Ranboo raises an eyebrow.

Tommy looks at both of them. A very old friend and a far newer one who had helped to save him. He had told Tubbo and Ranboo that he didn't know how to choose for himself anymore. He didn't know what to do with himself, because he's not used to anything like free will. Tommy knows what he wants to do. Maybe it's a foolish thing, a desperate ignorance, even something childish. Tommy is stubbornly proud of his ability to want something that might be unreasonable.

It isn't easy, Tommy trying to explain, but Ranboo and Tubbo listen all the same. "I want to do something. We've got... I'm here now. And I want to... I dunno. Have an event that doesn't end bloody. Kind of to... to thank everyone for all the shit they've done, but also for..." Tommy forces the words out, they feel like such a delicate thing. "For L'Manberg."

"Yeah?" Tubbo's voice softens, but he understands.

"I want it to be all of us," Tommy says.

"Who's all? That's also a bit vague."

"Well, at first I thought just the originals, but that felt unfair, you know? Like, Niki and Jack are obvious. But even then, there's more to it, yeah? No offense, Ranboo."

"Nah, fair enough," he shrugs.

"I get what you mean," Tubbo considers this carefully. "There are a lot of people who helped us, but who weren't *there*. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, but I think them too. Which... sort of defeats the purpose of a thing for L'Manberg, but even if they weren't *there* there, they were still *there*, yeah?" Tommy offers as explanation. "And it's not a festival or some shit," Tommy says quickly. "I don't think we should have another one of them. It's more just..." Tommy doesn't know how to describe



what he wants. What he *really* wants is a return to the old days, sitting around a campfire with people he trusted with his life, eating the same food, singing a new anthem. He knows it won't be that. He just wants *something*, even if he can't fully describe what. "We just need a reason."

~

Wilbur doesn't know how he got here, but he feels incredibly lucky.

Tommy wanted *everyone* and they would have everyone, but he also wanted it to be them first.

That is how Wilbur found himself sitting on the floor of his Camarvan, Tommy and Tubbo chatting away, sitting on top of the counter right behind him, Tommy as always talking the loudest, and Fundy and Eret familiar with learning to have their own conversation around him. Jack looks somewhat bored, sitting cross legged across from Niki, holding a mirror as she puts on makeup.

Wilbur wasn't sure whose idea the dress code was, but it had been decided everyone would dress for a *party*. Not fancy necessarily, the goal was more meant to be fun.

Wilbur has on a clean white button up on, faded to grey, striped with pale pink. He's also wearing a long brown coat. A *new* long brown coat. Quackity had turned up with it, it wasn't a gift, wrapped up and offered with a card, it wasn't even a favor. Quackity had just shrugged and handed it to him and said "*If you want to keep wearing that nasty old coat, fine. But you can't say I didn't try.*"

Wilbur still has that *nasty old coat*, buried in a chest somewhere. He couldn't bring himself to throw it away. The thought was like tearing off a limb. The one Quackity had given him wasn't identical, but it was close enough that Wilbur could find comfort in it. Maybe it helps that there isn't a hole in the back, a constant reminder of an old exit wound. It's summer, *no one* is wearing a coat. Out of the sun, Wilbur finds a way to be cold no matter what. The coat helps.

Maybe his attire isn't as put together as Jack's blazer, and definitely not as fancy as Eret in a gown, but it's all clean, not a stain or hole in it, and that's as fancy as Wilbur gets nowadays. Even Tommy had cleaned up, in his own Tommy-ish way. That being he's wearing a white button up *underneath* his usual red and white shirt and has a green bowtie on as well, Tubbo following his lead with his usual green shirt buttoned up correctly and a red bowtie to match Tommy's.

Wilbur only half attempts to tune into the conversations. A decade ago, or a bit over a year ago maybe, he'd always had something to say. He's still not used to conversation being an option, but it's okay to just listen. He does notice the way they've fractured off. Tubbo and Tommy together of course, always, but Eret and Fundy have chosen their corner even if they don't seem especially at ease with one another, just like Niki has dragged Jack aside with far more certainty. They're all together, but Wilbur sees the lines in the sand of things still left changed. Even this lot is a fracture of history. Eret being here maybe should seem wrong, but Niki and Jack don't *really* know to feel that wrongness, and if Eret wasn't meant to be

here, Wilbur most definitely wasn't. If the lines get any blurrier, they should get Quackity and Ranboo back here as well, maybe even Phil. They'll come eventually. This feels like a good start.

"Good?" Niki sits up, looking at Jack.

"Yeah. I like the colors," Jack says with halfhearted interest. "Can I put the mirror away now?"

"Yes—" Niki seems to reconsider. "*If* you let me put eyeshadow on you."

Jack stares at her, reproachful. "Will this take another twenty minutes?"

"I will just use red and blue. Like your glasses, okay?" Niki teases him, lightly punching his arm. "And it did *not* take twenty minutes."

Jack shrugs, "I don't care, but dunno what's the point if it's behind my glasses."

"The point is *fun*, Jack, if you might recall," Eret joins in.

"Yeah! It doesn't have to be just regular makeup," Niki sifts through her bag. "Actually, I have a bunch of old facepaint— I could paint something on your face as well, if you want?"

"Could you draw a bee on my face, Niki?" Tubbo perks up.

Niki laughs, endeared, "sure, Tubbo."

"Yeah, alright, then— I dunno what you'd draw on me," Jack shrugs. "Do what you like. My handsome face will be your canvas."

"Good," Niki nods smartly, scooting closer and leaning against him. "Now, close your eyes. And can you sit still?"

"I can't if you're gonna knock me over," Jack grumbles.

"You can sit up for a few more minutes, Jack, I'm already done with the eyes," Niki teases him, digging out something else from her bag.

Tubbo hops off the counter, sitting behind them, watching her work over her shoulder.

"What's that supposed to be?"

Niki's right side is toward the back wall, so the rest of them can't see what she's painting on Jack's cheek. Tommy hops down as well, "I want to see."

"Just wait a second, I just started," Niki rolls her eyes with little actual irritation.

"You should draw a dick on his face," Tommy offers wisely.

"Who says I'm not?" Niki shrugs, much to Tommy's delight and Jack's chagrin.

"Niki, *please*," Jack says with genuine desperation.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Niki says mildly.

“Oh, I see!” Tubbo says brightly. “That’s lovely! Could you do that on mine as well?”

“What, you want a dick drawn on your cheek, Tubso?” Tommy makes himself look scandalized.

“Sure, Tubbo. And if you’re not careful, Tommy, don’t think I’m above painting that on your cheek,” Niki is all mischief now.

“No, no I want to match Tubbo,” Tommy says quickly. “And Jack Manifold too, I guess.”

“What is it? You’re making me curious now too,” Fundy hops past Jack to join the rest of them.

“It’s getting too crowded,” Niki gives them all a look, making the three boys scoot back.

Fundy winces. “Oh, no, Jack...” He sighs. “I can’t believe you let her paint that on your face.”

“What?!” Now Jack is panicked, scrambling for the mirror.

Fundy cackles.

“Oh my god, Jack, you’re fine,” Niki laughs.

“Oh,” Jack sounds pleasantly surprised. “Well, that’s alright then. Actually, that’s great!”

“I *told* you they were messing with you, Jack.”

“No, no you actually didn’t, what you did say was much more ambiguous,” Jack says pointedly.

“Okay, Jack, just turn around, will you?” Eret speaks up. “You all have actually got me intrigued.”

Jack turns to face the rest of them, and on his left cheek is a L’Manberg flag.

“Oh, Niki, that is awesome, dude! What if—” Eret’s excitement turns more hesitant. They’d been a bit unsure since coming here, an invitation extended to them for *L’Manberg* is something that feels like a delicate thing. “I was thinking, what if we all...”

“What if we all matched?” Fundy says for them. “I’d... Yeah, I’d be down with that. That was a good idea, Niki.”

Niki looks so proud, cheeks just a bit pinker. “I think that sounds like a really nice idea. But I’m not doing all the work. You all can paint, can’t you?” She dumps out her bag, Tommy and Tubbo immediately fighting over a brush.

Fundy avoids the pair of them. “Eret? I promise I won’t paint a dick on your face.”

“I don’t!” Eret replies cheerfully, seeming more at ease at Fundy’s easy agreement; that this was something for all of them, together.

Wilbur has been in a sort of daze, almost. He’s been perfectly content to watch them all moving around him, but it’s like he isn’t quite sure how to cross back over, to be *with* them properly and completely.

“Wil?”

That is definitely his name, but it takes Wilbur a few seconds too long to realize Niki is talking to him. “What?”

She turns to face him, patting the ground in front of her. Her eyes look almost surrounded by fire. “Do you not want to?”

“N-No, I do, I definitely do,” Wilbur quickly joins her. “I just—” Wilbur doesn’t know how to explain. That Wilbur had felt like his job was to be a silent observer. Maybe just a holdover from Limbo, even as Ghostbur, he’d never let himself engage fully. He’s alive and better in so many ways, but not in every way. “Yeah, I do,” is all he says, sitting cross legged in front of her, staring at his own hands fidgeting in his lap.

“Wil,” Niki laughs. “I can’t paint your face if you’re not looking at me.”

“Right, right,” Wilbur looks up.

Niki goes to say something, before thinking better of it. Wilbur doesn’t know why she’s holding back. She’s more than within her rights to make fun of him for looking like a nervous tourist in his own home.

“Can I put stuff on your eyes too? Like I did with Jack?” Is what she says instead.

Wilbur manages a teasing tone, taking off his glasses. “Er, well, maybe not *on* my eyes, but on my eye *lids* I might allow—”

Niki gives him a look, brushing her hand over his face, against his eyelashes, so he’ll close them. “You know that’s what I meant.”

“Right then, okay,” Wilbur laughs softly. He lets his eyes close.

“Bend closer. You’re sitting down and you’re still too tall,” Niki’s hand on his shoulder makes him shift his posture to something probably not ideal for his spine. Wilbur didn’t mind. The brush against his eyelids almost made him jump, but Niki’s hand on his shoulder stays, it keeps him steady.

Tubbo and Tommy are not keeping still, each trying to paint the cheek of the other.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to do it one at a time—?”

“No, no we’re doing great,” Tommy dismisses it. “Look, my hands are already gonna shake, this way yours do too so it’s even!”

Tubbo laughs, “yeah, alright, then.”

Tommy bites his tongue, trying to focus on the brush enough to make a straight line. “Stop smiling! It’s all crooked when you smile,” Tommy pouts.

“You’re not holding still either,” Tubbo’s brush taps him on the nose.

Tommy leans back, gasping in offense. “How *dare* you!”

Tubbo sticks his tongue out at him. “I told you we should’ve taken turns.”

“Fine, you sit still, I paint,” Tommy nods smartly.

“Don’t draw something weird.”

“Fine, fine, but I *am* gonna make a bee. And I make no promises on how that will turn out,” Tommy could have easily chosen mischief, instead, on Tubbo’s left cheek, he tries. His hands don’t look so badly scarred alongside Tubbo’s own scarred face. They fit together so nicely, even if Tommy’s skills with a paintbrush could use some work. It looks more like a fly than a bee, but it’s a *yellow* fly, so Tommy thinks that should count.

“Are you done?”

“No, no wait, I wanna make flowers to go with it,” Tommy says, searching for more paints. “A blue one... and a white one.”

“Oh—“ Tubbo’s tone softens to something far more delicate. “*Oh,*” a gentle ache resonates in his chest.

Tommy knows what he’s said. He leans against Tubbo, who remains steady. He knows exactly why Tubbo is looking at him like that. Tommy exhales a laugh, teasing and gentle. “Just thought I’d return the favor.”

“Tommy...”

“No. Hush. You’ll distract me,” Tommy says.

Tubbo relents, content to let Tommy have his way, Tommy close enough that he’s breathing in his face, but how could Tubbo ever mind? Tommy is *breathing*.

“There we go!” Tommy leans back, satisfied.

Jack seems mildly bored, his part of the craft already done, he leans forward. “That looks—”

“*Amazing*— why yes, thank you, Jack Manifold, you’re too kind!” Tommy cuts him off.

“Looks like just blobs on sticks.”

“Yeah, not sure if you’ve noticed but all flowers are are blobs on sticks,” Tommy pouts.

“Can I see?” Tubbo asks, fidgeting restlessly.

“Jack Manifold!” Tommy says like an announcement.

“What?” Jack replies wearily.

“Get the mirror!” Tommy commands him.

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll get it then,” Tommy clambers to his feet.

“Wait, no, you’re supposed to keep nagging me until I do it– sit back down, I’ve got it,” Jack waves him off.

Tommy settles, looking pleased. “Aw, I’ve missed your charm, Jack.”

“Have you?” Jack says, teasing if not suspicious. Tommy seems to mean it.

“Yeah, Jack Manifold, *your charm*. No need to be so shocked,” Tommy rolls his eyes dramatically. Since Tommy’s return, his snark had held less bite, but Jack almost felt relieved nowadays to find a Tommy that’s both snarky and joking again.

Niki remains focused only on Wilbur’s face as the rest of them chatter around her. “Okay, done with the eyes!” She leans back, satisfied.

Wilbur opens them. “What color did you put on them?”

“You’ll see, you’ll see, I still have to do the flag,” Niki searches for what’s left of the facepaint. “Alright, tilt your head, pick a side,” she says.

Wilbur doesn’t need to shut his eyes for this part, but he’s glad he has to turn slightly away, so instead he can just watch the others rustling around the van. Fundy has a flag on his cheek now, but Eret has also decided to add whiskers. Fundy now painted Eret’s cheek with intent precision, the flag half finished. Jack had joined Tommy and Tubbo, Tubbo whose right cheek had the flag, and his left a messy scene of flowers and bees that Wilbur could recognize as Tommy’s endearingly shoddy handiwork. Wilbur hadn’t realized how much he had missed this. He hadn’t even been sure if this was *his* to miss anymore, but somehow Wilbur feels like this makes sense. All of it, including him being here. Things had been unsure for so long, Wilbur can’t figure out when he lost this feeling, or if he ever had it. Wilbur is nobody’s president nor hero nor villain nor martyr. Instead, he just gets to sit and let Niki paint on his face. It’s the only job Wilbur wants anymore.

Niki sits back, brushing her thumb gently across her handiwork, fixing up the edges. “Good! I think it’s done,” she smiles.

“What color is it, then?” Wilbur asks.

“Hold on, hold on– Jack, can I?” Niki leans away from him.

“Oh, Niki, I– I dunno,” Wilbur says hastily as she takes the mirror from Jack.

Niki stops, looking puzzled. “Do you not want to see it?”

“No, I—” Wilbur pauses, staring at her, glancing to the rest of them, none of whom pay him any mind. He’s not a corpse anymore. “Y-Yeah, yeah let me see.”

Wilbur says this, but he’s still looking at her, not at the mirror in front of her. Wilbur had, with almost impressive conviction, avoided his own reflection devoutly for weeks. He’s let himself remain trapped with nothing but a horrible distortion of his own dead face for a self image. Wilbur has not seen his own face beyond a corpse in over a decade. He’s scared that he will see his own face and find that nothing had changed. If lucky enough not to see dead eyes, then maybe something worse; the cruel, dark expression of the man who had haunted Pogtopia until he could find a way to die bloody. He doesn’t want that for himself anymore. And he won’t get any better by looking away.

Wilbur looks at the mirror, at his own painted face. And the first time he sees his reflection alive it is with Niki’s handiwork, her— maybe not her *forgiveness*, but her love, painted on his eyelids.

“It’s... It’s a sunrise,” Wilbur’s voice is hoarse and small and utterly in awe.

“Yeah! You can’t really see all of it with your eyes open, of course, but I thought it suited you,” Niki beams.

Wilbur stares. Blue that almost dusts his eyebrows, blended into a soft purple, to orange, to yellow. Those colors resting on top of brown eyes. Eyes not left glassy or out of focus or filmed over, eyes that have a soul behind them, eyes that crinkle up in the corner as he smiles.

“Thank you, Niki,” Wilbur’s hand brushes up to his own cheek, stopping himself before he could smudge the flag painted there.

“Wil!” Fundy breaks the spell, pulling Wilbur back into the room with them. He has his guitar case. “Where the hell did you find this, man?”

“Oh, uh, I-I mean I *have* it, yes, but I—” Wilbur doesn’t know how to explain. Fundy has his guitar, he knows what sort of request happens next.

“I dug it up out of Pogtopia,” Tommy answers. “I don’t think it’s in great shape, so.” Yeah. If *it* is the person who might play it, not the guitar itself.

Fundy takes the hint with surprising delicacy, putting it back. “It’s... It’s cool you have it again, Wil.”

Just from those words Wilbur knows no one here expects him to play. Somehow that doesn’t make Wilbur feel relieved. Tommy had defended him, because he knows as well as Wilbur does that this— all of it, it’s progress and that progress *matters*. But things still aren’t what they once were and they never will be. But there has to be a line, a delicate balance of finally moving forward and remembering, despite everything that’s changed from what was once their family, there was love there, and there is love here again, broken and repaired or maybe just changed, but love persevering.

~

Their plans for the evening are *not* a festival. There will be no speeches or fireworks or decorations beyond the flags always hanging on the platforms of New L'Manberg. Tommy had loosely described it as a party— and if he lets proximity be enough, a beach party.

Tommy's only expectation had been a campfire like the ones they had back in the day, the invitations had been vague and unofficial, no set list merely word of mouth, the details hadn't mattered, just something to push them all together. They gather outside New L'Manberg, in the grass adjacent to the Camarvan, where it's safe to have a fire. Tommy puts down his jukebox just as the sun began to set.

He plays Cat.

The first to arrive make sense. Phil and Ranboo merely cross the stream from New L'Manberg. Then Quackity follows and where Quackity goes, Sapnap and Karl are never far behind. Technoblade's attendance is more of a surprise, him serving as a nervous shadow for Phil, the great Blood God felled by a social gathering. Eret invited Foolish, Niki invited HBomb and Puffy. Tommy had spur of the moment asked Sam and Ponk to come, it only felt right after what they'd done for him, and he couldn't invite one without the other. Tommy wasn't sure how the Badlands found their way over, it could have been Sapnap or Sam or anyone else, but they come too. And so on and on and so it goes. It becomes such a messy web of friends and friends of friends but none of that really matters, because really Tommy is just triumphant in how utterly unalone they are.

Tommy stays close to Tubbo, and Wilbur close to Tommy, and Tommy finds himself drifting away from the Jukebox and Cat and that doesn't scare him anymore. Maybe he shouldn't be so trusting, or maybe it's not even a matter of trust. Tommy is tired of being scared. And whoever there's left for him to mistrust is overshadowed in those who will protect him.

Wilbur used to always find himself at the center. He talked well and he talked loud and people would listen. He was charming and confident and he would let the world focus on him just a bit more sharply. Wilbur doesn't know anymore. He likes to be there. He likes to listen, and he likes it when other people look at him when he speaks, because he's really there, but it's been harder for him to find anything worth saying.

So eventually he both retreats and pushes himself a little further. He goes back into the Camarvan and returns with a guitar case. *Now* they gravitate in on him, Wilbur Soot with a guitar and all the magnetism of a black hole, people take notice. Just like they used to and if that doesn't fill Wilbur with the excited, terrified static of being alive, he doesn't know what will.

Tommy looks away for a minute and Wilbur has his guitar again, startling sure, but for a moment Tommy feels both hopeful and almost hurt, but Wilbur isn't playing it, Tommy hasn't missed his brother's glorious return. He's sat by the fire, holding it just out of the case, but not nestled neatly against his chest like it usually would be. He's not getting ready to play. He looks like he doesn't know what to do with it. Already people are looking his way, curious. Tommy is going to get there first.



Tommy taps Tubbo on the arm, nodding in Wilbur's direction. Tubbo follows his gaze and for a moment he lights up, but he sees as well as Tommy that Wilbur seems stuck. Wordlessly an understanding is exchanged, Tubbo nods, and they join him by the fire.

Tommy is on Wilbur's right side. "Alright?" He asks him.

Wilbur stares at those gathered around him. And he cannot bring himself to move. He wants this. He wants to play again. He just doesn't think he can, so instead, he speaks.

"Quackity."

"What?" Quackity stares at him from across the fire, looking startled. "What's, uh, what's up?"

Wilbur stands, and offers him the guitar. "I'm... a little rusty. Would you do the honors?"

Quackity hesitates for another moment, brown eyes careful if not understanding as he accepts it. He understands, maybe not personally, but he knows the weight of the thing as he takes the guitar from Wilbur's hands. "Yeah, yeah sure. Uh. What am I playing?"

"Come on, Big Q, you know what to play," Tommy says.

The anthem. If Tommy is singing too, this Wilbur can manage. And it's not just Tommy. It's not just *L'Manberg*, at least not just as Wilbur knows it. Tommy and Wilbur meet each other's gaze, each with the same startled contentment and pride. Tommy hadn't realized how many people knew the anthem either.

The rest of the night comes easily, a gentle thing. Tommy is happy. That had been the point of it all, surely. This moment, late at night, old friends and friends of friends leaving after time spent willingly and wasted joyfully, it's exactly what Tommy had wanted. Tommy had gotten what he wanted. It's almost more surprising that that doesn't seem so strange to him anymore.

Their numbers dwindle. Tubbo, Ranboo, Phil, and Techno are still in New L'Manberg, talking under the glow of the lanterns, but Tommy and Wilbur are the last to stay by the dying fire.

Tubbo isn't far, neither are their other close friends, but they're not *here*. Not within this moment between two brothers who kept living; who kept living and *wanted* to keep living, even if they took the long way round to get to this point. Quackity had returned the guitar, not to its case, but very deliberately to Wilbur's unsure hands before he left. Wilbur hasn't set it down. He's no longer holding it like it's a bomb, it's resting in front of his torso. All he needs to do is put his hands on the strings.

"Hey, Wil?" Tommy watches as Wilbur stares into the fire, unfocused.

"Yeah, Tommy?"

"Do you *want* to play?"

Wilbur glances over at him, not surprised by the question, not really. He's maybe more surprised by how sure he is in his own answer. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Okay," Tommy nods. "But you can't."

"I know what you're thinking, and— and I don't *think* it's about deserve," Wilbur is rambling and emphatic in an instant, like he's just been waiting for the right push, talking more to the fire than to him. "I don't think— It's not that I don't *deserve* to play it, and in Limbo I couldn't because... because there was no one to listen, so it just hurt, and now I just— I actually... I..."

"Hey, we'll figure this out," Tommy is so *steady*.

Wilbur takes a breath, the heat of the fire, the brightness of it, overwhelming and comforting at the same time. "You don't know how to play the guitar."

"Yeah. *You* do."

Wilbur laughs, almost embarrassed. "That's the thing, isn't it?" A pause, Tommy just waits. "It's gonna sound different. No matter how much I remember, a-and I know it's because I'm out of practice, and not practicing isn't going to help, but it's not gonna *sound* right." It feels like such a ridiculous thing, *yes, Wilbur playing the guitar for the first time in over a decade will not sound right*.

Tommy doesn't judge him, he doesn't tease him or tell him to *just try*, but he doesn't give up on him either. Wilbur never gave up on him.

"Could you show me?" Tommy asks.

"What?"

"Show me," Tommy nods to the guitar. "I want you to show me how to play. A demonstration. Come on, I've wanted you to show me for ages now." A pause, Tommy giving Wilbur a moment to reply. He still hesitates. "*Please?* Come on, I'm giving you my best puppy dog eyes, you *have* to say yes!"

Wilbur stares at him, putting on an exasperated front, even as Tommy makes all of this easier for him. He knows Tommy won't quit and no matter how unsure he is, he's grateful. Wilbur looks down. It's almost like watching someone else at first, hands still so naturally finding their proper place. He plays.

Wilbur knows he's not playing it well, that he's all but forgotten how, but the look on Tommy's face when he watches him, *radiant* and joyful and so amazed by whatever Wilbur manages, it makes him want to try again.

It's bad and messy and hesitant and it's the most amazing thing Tommy has ever heard. He never thought he'd hear this again, his brother fumbling with the strings, but playing nonetheless. *Fuck* symphonies. His brother is alive. He's *home*. Tommy has known for a long time now he deserves a kinder world, *they* deserve a kinder world, but what they *deserve*

doesn't matter, *deserve* is a feeble game, a set of rules for dead men. Tommy is tired of cruel games and stupid rules. He wanted his brother, he wanted to feel okay again. And here he is, resting easy just outside the Camarvan, not in *the* L'Manberg, but *a* L'Manberg that has stood up out of the ashes and breathed again right alongside them, just as scarred and changed and just as alive. He got what he wanted.

The notes fade, almost as unsteady as when they began, and they're left with the dim crackle of the fire, crickets and cicadas like an endless applause, and just faintly, the gentle hum of voices of other people they love just across the water.

Wilbur looks at his brother and can't help but feel honored to be worth whatever look Tommy is giving him right now. "So, uh, not *too* bad?"

"Nah," Tommy says, his efforts at being blasé are weakened by the way he's looking at Wilbur, the kind of awe that only a little brother can have. "Not too bad at all." Tommy sounds so *proud*. "Play it—" The light has not faded from behind his eyes, blue standing out against the darkness. "Play it again?"

Wilbur does as Tommy asks. He keeps going.

## Chapter End Notes

I am still writing dsmp fics like crazy, so feel free to stick around for more stuff like this, and more stuff not at all like this! Right now we've got Wake Up, the miserable au to this fic, and a [Mafia AU](#) I'm quite excited about. I'm always on [tumblr](#) if you want to say hi.

As always, feedback is cherished. Thanks for coming along for the ride <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!